

# TEEVADHARA

JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

## BIBLE: THE WORD OF GOD

### THE WORD OF GOD

*Samuel Rayan*

### THE WORD OF GOD AND THE FORMS OF LITERATURE

*George Soares*

### THE WORD OF GOD AND CREATION

*C. M. Cherian*

### THE WORD OF GOD AND HISTORY

*J. M. Pathrapankal*

### JESUS AS THE WORD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

*Mathew Vellanickal*

### 'WORD' IN THE TRADITIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA AND EGYPT

*K. Luke*

### SOME ASPECTS OF THE R̥GVEDIC CONCEPTION OF 'VAK-'

*K. Luke*

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# The Word of God

## BIBLE: THE WORD OF GOD

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*A Journal of Christian Interpretation*

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# Editorial

IN the current issue of *Jeevadhara* an attempt is made to study in a succinct fashion the theme, *Bible: The Word of God*. It is not only the word that God spoke long ago, but also the word that He speaks, here and now, to the believer. Samuel Rayan elucidates the meaning of the phrase 'the Word of God' in its wide sense. The word as handed down to us in the two Testaments takes concrete form and shape in the various literary genres in vogue in the biblical milieu. This specific aspect of the word is studied by G. M. Soares-Prabhu. C. M. Cherian, J. M. Pathrapankal and Mathew Vellanickal examine the biblical text and give a synthetic presentation of the theme of God's word in the Old and New Testaments. The article on Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions endeavours to outline briefly the general oriental background of the biblical conceptions.

*Jeevadhara* wishes to enter into fruitful dialogues with other religions, for which an acquaintance with their ideas regarding the word is essential. The Koranic teaching on this point has been deliberately left out since it represents only a continuation of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, with, of course, some elements derived from the genius of the Arab people. The article on *Vak*-, meant to help the reader to have some idea of the thought regarding our subject in the first Veda, is not intended to be exhaustive but only suggestive; in it an endeavour is also made to convey to the non-specialist some idea of the techniques and methods of the professional Indologist and Indo-Europeanist. A similar discussion on the idea of the word in the Avesta or Zoroastrian scriptures would have been quite in place, but for reasons of space, the plan had to be abandoned.



Finally the writer (who is supposed to be the editor of the biblical section) wishes to mention here the fact that the person actually responsible for the publication of the present issue is Fr Constantine, the General Editor, who approved of his plan, contacted Scripture scholars and obtained their contributions.

In conclusion, we all know that our work has its drawbacks, for in a country like India we don't have the facilities for scientific pursuits, but even in this case the principle holds good that something is better than nothing.

Chicago, 5th March, 1971.

K. Luke



# The Word of God

THE Word of God in the New Testament is, in the first place, Jesus Christ himself. He is God's full and final self-disclosure; the Word through whom the universe was made, now become man within the universe<sup>1</sup>; the Son through whom God is now speaking to us after speaking to the world in various ways in times past<sup>2</sup>. But the word is also used in the New Testament with three other meanings: (i) the apostolic ministry of the word, or the early christian preaching about Jesus, about the meaning for us of Jesus' person, words and deeds<sup>3</sup>; (ii) many individual sayings of Jesus and sometimes his preaching taken as a whole are also called the word<sup>4</sup>; (iii) the Old Testament too is acknowledged as the word of God<sup>5</sup>. Now Yahweh's words given in the Old Testament may be grouped under three heads: the words Yahweh gives to the prophets to proclaim to particular audiences at specific points of time; the law and instruction directed to the whole people as a permanent guide to life; lastly God's creative utterance by which the world is fashioned and its course maintained<sup>6</sup>.

Early christian reflection on Jesus, carried on against the background of Old Testament experience and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit showed that in Jesus God had spoken his definitive word of revelation and salvation for all time; that the Christ-event was the culmination and

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1. Jn. 1:1-3, 14; Rev 19:13

2. Heb 1:1-3

3. Acts 6:4; 13:5; 15:36; Lk 1:2; Acts 1:1; 4:31; 6:2, 7

4. Mt 26:75; Lk 22:61; Jn 7:36; cf. Acts 11:16; 20:35; Lk. 5:1;  
I Thes 4:15; Mk 2:2; 4:33

5. Mk 7:13; Mt 1:22; 2:15; 15:6; Rom 12:19

6. See J. B. Bauer, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1970), art. Word

crown of a whole history of redemptive action on behalf of man; that the Old Testament and all other revelations were inwardly ordered to this final Word in Jesus; and that all other revelations have been made through the Son. Therefore every self-disclosure of God from the beginning of the world will reflect, and partake of, the one Word who is the complete self-utterance of God, and will share in the Word's incarnation as well, being a revelation made to the world in terms of earthly realities for the benefit of man. All of them may then be contemplated and greeted in due measure as God's word.

When this is done, when it is said that Jesus is, or the Bible contains, the word of God, we are seeking to understand divine communications in terms of a familiar reality, the word of man, human language. Man's word holds and conveys the word of God, and becomes its sign and symbol, illustration and analogy. We should do well then to return often to a contemplation of the mystery of the human word in order to be able to grasp more fully, and appreciate more deeply, the mystery of the word of God.

The role language plays in our daily life, the place it holds and the power it wields, are, when we come to think of it, astonishingly great. In the first place, the very quantity of words spoken and written the world over in the course of a day is overwhelming: mountains and oceans of words, torrents and clouds of them, constellations and galaxies; issuing from hearts and mouths of men and women, from swift pens and busy editorial offices, homes, schools, market-places, parliaments. Secondly, the function of human words is diverse and yet often enough thoroughly vital. Words are foundational, for instance, in the education of a child. He is built up with words, much of his specifically human growth is secured through them. They mediate to him the entire cultural heritage of man. Without words how stunted would be his mind and life, how

truncated his humanity. Withdraw language from the world of education, and what would happen to our institutions and to the future of the world? One could speculate along the same lines in regard to politics and parliament, trade and love. Without language there would be little or nothing of education, social life, personal encounter, international communication, or human development. Cancel it out and life goes still and the human world vanishes, homes become silent, love fades and dies, minds close and darken, and children develop no more than wild cubs. A great deal of our life is made up of speech, and language lies deep in the foundations of civilizations. The book you read, the stories you tell, the songs you sing, the newspaper you peruse, the love-letter you weep over, the poems you muse upon, the homely conversation you join in, the lectures you listen to, the questions you ask, your debates in the assembly, the advertisements which make life interesting by coaxing you into desiring all that you do not need—all these are an employment of, and engagement in, that thing of wonder: human language.

The more perfect it is and developed and refined, the greater is its power to express, to educate, to delight, to effect. The more powerful the speech, the nearer it comes to action. It can wound and heal, kill or quicken, destroy or build up, confuse or enlighten. A word can disrupt friendships built through years, can undermine self-confidence, can ruin lives, and cause conflagrations within families and nations. A word can also soothe the sorrowing heart, infuse confidence and rebuild broken lives, kindle dying love, dissipate whole nights from within the spirit of man and point the way, can cheer, comfort, create, attract, honour. Words can help you open up and communicate, share mind and heart, and give you entrance into whole worlds, old and new, of thought and culture. They stimulate creative thinking and carry ideas across ages, oceans and prejudices. You



will find among them trade words and gift words and words of promise, words which take hold of things powerfully and convey them from man to man, and reknit whole networks of relationships, and create fresh human and moral situations. You will meet, in epic and lyric or sonnet and song, strong and heroic words, words of fire and flint, words billowy and graceful, cadenced, rhythmical, liquid words.

Such is the word of man, a mysterious thing, beautiful and terrible, frail and effective, supple and free, moulding you while being moulded by you, many-scented and multi-coloured, pleasing and abundant, liquid light. Human language is a mystery of this sort because it is the symbol, the sign and the image of the Word of God. God's Word is all this and more, and operates at the deepest levels of human existence, in the very heart of man where life and spirit, joint and marrow divide. There it judges man, destroys sin, gives assurance of forgiveness, rebuilds the ruined soul, and makes hope shine and love blossom. If man's word is so basic and vital in human life and growth and fellowship, how much more so the Word of God in our fellowship with him and our life and growth in him.

## II

Men of the Word of God who have known its power and its blessing have borne witness to their experience. To Jeremiah the Word was a gift from Yahweh, imparting energy of action, inviting persecution, and infusing strength to endure. Yahweh put his words in the young prophet's mouth and set him over nations and kingdoms to pluck, break down, destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. The first experience was good. "Thy words were found and I ate them," the prophet said, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart." But trouble came later. "For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long. If I say I will not speak any more in his name, there is in my heart as it



were a burning fire shut up in my bones.” The overall remembrance is that Yahweh’s word is “like fire, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces.”<sup>7</sup>

Second Isaiah mentions the effective character of the word: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”<sup>8</sup>

The New Testament testimony is that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus’ own words were experienced by the people as wonderful and gracious; there was in them an astonishing authority and power. Some of the disciples at least felt their hearts burn within them as Jesus talked to them and explained the scriptures. The mind of all who sensed in Jesus’ words a liberating and life-giving efficacy was expressed by Peter when he said, “We shall not leave you, you have the words of eternal life.”<sup>10</sup>

### III

The Word of God, then, is powerful, efficacious and creative. When spoken, it reveals God who is its source, but it does so by creating something new. Revelation is

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7. Jer 1:9-10; 15:16; 20:8,9; 23:29

8. Is 55:10-11

9. Heb 4:12

10. Lk 4:22; Mt 7:28-29; Jn 6:68; Lk 6:47-49; 24:32

always creation as well, a simultaneous self-disclosure and self-communication of God. And creation, besides being a word of God, is also a word about God. This is true both of the world and of Jesus Christ.

The Bible presents the world as called into existence by God's commanding word. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He said, "Let there be light," and there it was. He said, "Let there be a firmament, Let birds fly, Let the earth bring forth living creatures," and so it was.<sup>11</sup> Later on, an Israelite prayer-song would confess, "For he spoke, and it came to be, he commanded, and it stood forth".<sup>12</sup> And in the hour of Israel's comforting and restoration after the Babylonian exile God would remind his people that he has the power to re-create them: for "When I call them (the heavens and the earth) they stand forth together."<sup>13</sup>

The world is there because God said it. It exists as an answer to his call. The whole of it is a word of God, spoken, realized, concretised, crystallised and expressed in terms of matter, life and movement. But God has not spoken the world and withdrawn. The universe is essentially and foundationally what God is saying now. Each moment he is calling it forth from the depths of nothing but his creative power. If the world is there, it is because it is still being said by God, is a divine word in the course of utterance, a reality in the making, a reality growing and coming Godward from its own native nothingness and approaching the Real. The world is therefore a living word of God, a present proclamation, a divine self-disclosure. It is a revelation which we must listen to, hear and heed. A great book beautifully illustrated: a volume of hieroglyphics which we have only begun to decode and interpret. What

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11. Gn I

12. Ps 33:9

13. Is 48:13

we have been able to decipher thus far is just marvellous. Divine words of great beauty and power, of strength, mystery and hope, are the simple everyday realities around us, like trees and stones, and water, landscape, colours, sounds, and the air and light in which everything stands bathed. These are words; and not mere things. They carry a message for us, a personal word from the Father; a word of judgement and of hope. They are signs that carry and convey his friendship. They will disclose their secret and deliver their message to admiring eyes and affectionate hearts.

The Bible contains glimpses of the meditations of such hearts. A remarkable one is Psalm 104 which recognises the light as God's garment, clouds as his chariot, and the winds as his messengers; and sees young lions seeking their food from God and all living things eating their fill out of God's open hands. The most famous of these contemplative pieces is Jesus' word about the birds of the air and the flowers of the field which the Father feeds and clothes<sup>14</sup>. More significant reflections on, and interpretations of, the cosmic Bible may be found in the parables of Jesus, and still more in his sacraments. In Jesus' hands our earth's realities become illustrations of the Kingdom. The presupposition is that they naturally integrate with the new revelation given in Christ, and that the mystery of the Kingdom is already enshrined in them as in a word of God. It is within this view of the world as God's word that the role of nature's parables in the proclamation of the Kingdom is truly understood, and the possibility of the whole of nature serving the cause of the Gospel is perceived in depth. A parallel reflection is in order with regard to the sacraments. Things can become sacraments of the Word-made-flesh because already they are the word of God become matter for the benefit of man.

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14. Mt 6:25-30

The universe is not only a word of God but also a word about God. Spoken by him, it speaks also of him. Spoken to itself and to us, it speaks itself and us to God too. That is what the heavens are doing in telling the glory of God, and the firmament in proclaiming his handiwork<sup>15</sup>. That is why the heavens are invited to be glad and the earth to rejoice, the fields to exult and all the trees of the wood to sing for joy before the Lord<sup>16</sup>. On the day the foundations of the earth were laid, the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy<sup>17</sup>. Creation hymns the glory of God and turns to him, speaking itself to him in glad thanks for the gift of self to itself. But it also turns to us with a voice witnessing to God: the rains, the fruitful seasons and the food that gladdens hearts are witnesses to the fact that God is there, that he is there for us and that he cares<sup>18</sup>. In a very real sense the gospel miracles represent the eagerness of creation to burst into a song of praise before the Lord and give witness to men and manifest his glory as did the new wine in Cana of Galilee<sup>19</sup>. The miracle means that the word of God, which things are, can blossom into witnessing glory.

#### IV

If nature is something God is saying, a word of his, much more so is man. On this human point, the thing-words of nature and the whole cosmos converge to consciousness. For man is what God finally says to the universe; he is its meaning. From him are things to receive their name, nature and identity<sup>20</sup>. Psalm 8 reveals an awareness that

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15. Ps 19:7-6

16. Ps 96:11-13

17. Job 38:7

18. Acts 14:14-17; cf. Rom 1:18-21; Ps 104:27-30; 145:15

19. Jn 2:1-11

20. Gn 2:18-20



the word of glory that is the universe, the majesty of God that fills the earth, is gathered up in man and given him as a crown. "What is man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than God, you crown him with glory and honour, you have given him dominion over the work of your hands." Hence it is Paul could say, "all things are yours," thus echoing Genesis 1, and the basic scheme of creation. The scheme is centred on man, and finally on the man Jesus. Jesus often points out how much the worth of man exceeds the worth of things. Man is more value than the birds of the air; and if God so clothes the grass of the field will he not much more clothe you?<sup>21</sup> Jesus places man far above the most venerable religious observances and traditions of his people, when he sets aside the Sabbath in favour of man and declares man to be its master<sup>22</sup>. Man therefore is creation's crowning word.

Men are so much God's word that 'what the law requires is written on their hearts'<sup>23</sup>. Their inner reality is identical with the written law. The promise of the new covenant stresses this identity and interiorises the law. God would be putting his law within man, and writing it upon his heart<sup>24</sup>. Finally the identity is carried to its climax in Jesus Christ who is the new law, wholly interior, by which men live the new life.

It is not merely that man is what God says to the world to crown it, but man is also God's best word to men. The baby is the finest word God says to father and mother, and the bride, his loveliest word to the bridegroom. Each to each is a word and gift of joy as in early paradise days<sup>25</sup>, and a challenge to care. So truly is each given into the

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21. Mt 6:25-30

22. Mk 2:23 to 3:6

23. Rom 2:15

24. Jer 31:31-34

25. Gn 2:18-25

care of each that God can always ask any, "Where is your brother?" and we ought to have the answer, one a bit more civilized than Cain's<sup>26</sup>. Man is to man the image and presence of God, the revelation of his will, a covenant of love and promise of salvation. Man is to man Jesus' new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." Each is given to each as token of this love of his. In this commandment, and therefore in this man here who needs your care and aid are summed up the entire law and the prophets<sup>27</sup>. The needy man is the profoundest and most pressing word of God; the hungry millions, the compelling burden of his message. If I have heard this word and heeded it, I have 'known' the mind of the Lord and lived it, and have known and lived all sacred words and all divine discourses, doctrines and duties. But if I have neglected this one word, it is useless to have read all the rest and to have "prophesied in your name and cast out demons and done mighty works" for Jesus will not be able to recognize me<sup>28</sup>.

In the story of the Samaritan there is a priest who, I presume, knew the Torah and the Nebiim, the law and the prophets, thoroughly and searched the scriptures in which he thought he had eternal life<sup>29</sup>; but actually he had never encountered the living and liberating word of God. He had never become spiritually free to recognize the substance of the law and the prophets lying there bare and red on the road-side. The Samaritan was free: his heart had learnt to heed the Covenant and promise that is the little one, the least one, the needy man, man.

Since God speaks man and in man, he speaks also

26. Gn 4:1-16

27. Rom 13:8-10

28. Mt 7:21-23

29. Jn 5:39

in human decisions and in the activities and movements they give rise to. While these are man's full responsibility, God can, without in the least diluting their human quality or diminishing their human dimensions, make them a word of his own, something he wants to say to men by way of judgement and salvation. The pressure of invasions upon Mesopotamian lands, leading to migrations of peoples that took Abraham from Haran to Canaan, was, at a deeper level of historical truth, the word of God instructing a man to leave his kin and country and 'come away to a land I shall show you' <sup>30</sup>. The indignation in the heart of Moses kindled by the burning historical situation of his people in Egypt, and the escape made possible by a series of events, were God's work and word. So too the victorious advent of Cyrus of Persia on the scene of Israel's captivity was God's doing and an evangel of liberation <sup>31</sup>. Such is Israel's special understanding of history. Events were God's acts and media of revelation. This word-of-God approach to reality will make us sensitive to the presence and voice of God in today's events and movements. In them God speaks his judgement on our times, which it is ours to try to decipher so that we may collaborate with the Lord of history in making our world.

The word of God in nature, in man and in history—all come to a culmination and climax in Jesus Christ, his life and deeds, his experiences and relationships. But he was also at the beginning and root of all this; for nature and history and man have their basis and consistency and fulfilment in Jesus; they are through him, in him and for him <sup>32</sup>. They are echoes and rays and reflections of the reality that he is. They are words in the measure they relate to him and hold him.

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30. Gn 12

31. Is 40:1-11; 45:1-8; 48:14-16

32. Eph 1:1-14; Col 1:5-20; Jn 1:1-5

The word of God then is given to us, revealed and communicated, primarily in Jesus Christ, in the reality of a human person and a human life concretely lived on this earth. Then the Word is given to us in creation, that is in the cosmos and especially in ourselves; we experience ourselves as something God is saying to ourselves and our life is a listening and an existential responding. We have the word given us also in other human realities like food, and decisions, and human relationships, and social situations and all the historical process. Finally all this is gathered and enshrined in human language which is the most useful and powerful delicate medium we have, of revelation and communion. Hence in an attempt to appreciate God's self-gift in Jesus we call Jesus the Word of God. In the same spirit we could look upon the universe and history and mankind as a whole and every individual person as a real word of God, as the larger Bible, often the necessary living part of it, before which we must stand and build our life.

Lumen Institute,  
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Samuel Rayan



# The Word of God and the Forms of Literature

## The Bible and Oral Tradition

BEFORE ever it was written down the Word of God was a spoken word, spoken to men through men,<sup>1</sup> and so an heir to both the conceptual and idiomatic limitations of a concrete language (Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek) as well as to the rich multiplicity of form and function which the spoken human word possesses. This has long been evident for the Old Testament. One of the earliest results of the critical study of the Bible in the last century was the convincing demonstration that its first five books were not, as had so far been believed, the work of Moses, but had been compiled from various sources, none of which went back to before the 10th century B. C.<sup>2</sup> Yet these books speak of events, like the history of the Patriarchs and the Exodus, which happened more than five hundred years earlier (1800-1300 B. C.). Their sources, then, must have had a long pre-history. They are obviously the records of cycles of the traditions, which were transmitted orally for centuries as

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1. Cf. Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (CTS edition, n. 41). The implications of the human character of the Word of God, are worked out with great originality and insight in L. Alonso-Schökel, *The Inspired Word*, New York: Herder, 1965, pp. 49-90.

2. That the first six books of the Bible (from Genesis to Joshua) have been composed by the interweaving of four major sources was proposed by J. Wellhausen in 1878 (in his *Prolegomena Zur Geschichte Israels*, now available in English: *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, New York: Meridian Books, 1957), and is now an accepted part of O. T. scholarship. The four sources are the *Yahwist*, the *Elohist*, the *Priestly* and the *Deuteronomist*.

tribal memory of the ancestors of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

This is more or less true of most of the other books of the Old Testament too. The historical books sometimes refer to written annals (like the 'Book of the Acts of Solomon' in I Kings 11: 41, or the 'Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel' in I Kings 14: 19), but incorporate considerable amounts of oral tradition too (like the Elijah sagas of I Kings 17: 1-19:21)<sup>4</sup>. Prophetic oracles were uttered by a prophet, then remembered and circulated in prophetic circles for generations before being written down.<sup>5</sup> The Psalms were sung in public worship, before being available for private reading in a book. Only with some of the wisdom books does the Bible rise to the level of self-conscious literature. A book like Job or the Wisdom of Ben-Sirach appears to be a unified literary composition, conceived and written as such. But even the wisdom scribes have obviously included a great deal of popular wisdom in their works, especially in the form of their many proverbs, whose sharp pungency often carries the unmistakable flavour of the market-place rather than that of the school.<sup>7</sup>

The books of the Old Testament, then are not really 'books' in our sense of the word, each written by a definite

3. Cf. G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962, Vol. I, pp. 105-305; J. H. Otwell, *A New Approach to the Old Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1967, pp. 31-54

4. Cf. J. Gray, *I & II Kings*, London: SCM Press, 1970, pp. 6-43

5. Cf. G. W. Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, London: Duckworth, 1959, pp. 103-105.

6. Pioneering work on the cultic background of the Psalms has been done by S. Mowinckel in his *Psalmstudien* I-VI (1922-24), part of which has been published in English as *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 Vols. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962. Cf. also A. Weiser, *The Psalms*, London: SCM Press, 1962, pp. 23-34

7. Cf. W. McKane, *Proverbs*, London: SCM Press, 1970, p. 3.

author once and for all, the way that say *Shakuntala* was written by Kalidasa or *The Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru. R. A. F. McKenzie gives us a striking illustration of this. Of the Book of Judges he says:

Its raw material began, in the 12th century B. C., as oral traditions of particular exploits and victories, circulating in different *milieux* before eventually and at different times being committed to writing. In the regnal period (10th century), two collections of this material were formed—by two different editors, naturally—one in the north, one in the south. The two were combined after the fall of Samaria (722 B. C.), by another editor who added a moralising introduction. During the Exile (586-538 B. C.), a Deuteronomic editor produced an enlarged second edition of this work, with the doctrinal lessons made more explicit. Probably in the 5th century, the work was further enlarged by the insertion of the Minor Judges and the addition of the two appendices. Thus the book was 800 years in the making<sup>8</sup>.

Like Judges, most of the books of the Old Testament are not so much 'books' as gradual sedimentations of the sacred tradition of Israel.

To a remarkable extent this is true of the New Testament too, even though writing was much more common in New Testament times than it was in the pre-conquest period of Israel's history to which the earliest traditions of the Old Testament belong; and even though the interval between the event and its writing down, between history and book, was much shorter for the New Testament than it was for the Old. It was perhaps 800 years after the beginnings of the patriarchal history, that its first sketch was written down, and it took five hundred years more for this to assume its finished form. But the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel to be written, appeared less than 40 years after the death of

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8. R. A. F. McKenzie, "Some Problems in the Field of Inspiration," *CBQ*, 20 (1958) 3.

Jesus<sup>9</sup>. Still, oral tradition lies behind much of the New Testament too.

Traces of an oral pre-history are to be found in nearly all the New Testament books: in the Pauline Epistles, which presuppose everywhere the oral teaching of the Apostle, and in places (as in I Cor 15:3) expressly allude to a tradition which is being handed on; in Acts whose early chapters at least report anecdotes which must have circulated in the oral tradition of the Early Church<sup>10</sup>; possibly too in the Apocalypse, which, though it is the most obviously 'literary' work in the New Testament, apparently very unified in content and style, is, in its present form, the result probably of successive re-editions and expansions of a primitive nucleus<sup>11</sup>. But it is in the Gospels that the oral pre-history of the New Testament becomes truly visible.

The attentive reader of Mk, the first and original Gospel (since according to the generally accepted view both Mt and Lk are derived from it), is soon aware that the Gospel, except, for its continuous Passion Narrative, is made up of a series of self-contained stories, which can be lifted from their context without any loss of meaning. The individual stories do not depend on what has been said, nor do they point, to what is to come. Each is a unit in itself, the report of an incident (a miracle worked by Jesus, an instruction given to his disciples, a controversy with the Pharisees) with no indication of where or when the incident

9. Mk is believed to have been written between 65-70, Mt and Lk between 80-90 A. D. — cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1966, *ad rem*.

10. Cf. E. Haenchen *Die Apostelgeschichte* Göttinger: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1956, p. 95; P. Benoit, "La mort de Judas", in his *Exégèse et Théologie* I, Paris: Cerf, 1961, pp. 340-59.

11. Cf. A. Feuillet, *L'Apocalypse*, Paris/Bruges: Desclée, 1962, pp. 26f.



occurred. Story is joined to story with the flimsiest of links—often a mere ‘and’ (1: 16, 40; 2: 23; 3: 20, 31; 7: 1, 32), which is sometimes strengthened with an ‘immediately’ (1: 12, 21, 29; 6: 45) or an ‘again’ (2: 1, 13; 3: 1; 4: 1; 11: 27)—and these are quite evidently editorial.

What we have in the Gospel, then, is a collection of sayings of Jesus and stories about him, and all these circulated as isolated units in the oral tradition of Mark’s church, and have been edited by him into some semblance of a continuous narrative. The ‘framework’ of the Gospel is artificial. Karl Ludwig Schmidt concludes his classic study on the subject with the words: “On the whole there is in the Gospels no life of Jesus in the sense of a developing biography, no chronological outline of the history of Jesus, but only isolated stories, pericopes, which have been provided with a framework”<sup>12</sup>. The Gospels are like a string of pearls, in which the string has been taken away.

Behind the written word of the Old and New Testaments, then, there stand oral traditions, in which the stories and sayings now found in the Bible were long transmitted and shaped, before being frozen in the written text. Scholars (mostly Scandinavian) belonging to what has come to be known as the Tradition History School<sup>13</sup> maintain that this period of oral transmission is all that counts. The material found in the Old Testament, claims I. Engnell, “was definitely modelled and fixed already at the oral stage, the taking down in writing itself thus meaning absolutely nothing new or revolutionary.”<sup>14</sup>

12. K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*, Berlin Trowitzsch, 1919.

13. Cf. E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*, London: SCM Press, 1954 and I. Engnell, “Methodological Aspects of Old Testament Study”, in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* VII Leiden: Baill, 1960: pp. 13-30.

14. I. Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*, 13, quoted in K. Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte*, Neukirchen: Neulirchener Verlag, 1964, p. 98, n. 43.

But this is an exaggeration. Biblical tradition is *principally*, not purely, oral,<sup>15</sup> and it is an oral tradition which has in fact been written down. This last is not so irrelevant as Engnell believes. The passage from speech to writing is always significant, if only because the forms of writing are not the forms of speech. One does not write a letter the way one carries on a conversation, nor does a sermon read like an essay. So the writing down of the biblical tradition must inevitably have meant the adaptation of the units of oral tradition to the written style. K. Koch points out how most of the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament, all of which probably once began with the stereotyped messenger formula: 'Thus speaks the Lord', were shorn of this distinctive element when collected into books, because here the constant repetition of the formula would have been unbearably monotonous.<sup>16</sup> This is a good example of the kind of change that must have taken place, when the stories and sayings of the oral tradition were assembled into large written collections.

But the biblical books are not merely collections of traditions. While they are not freely composed books, in our sense of the word, they do possess, in many cases at least (and this is specially true of the Gospels),<sup>17</sup> a literary and theological unity of their own. Their 'authors', while not authors in any modern sense of the word, are not merely collectors of tradition, but can be best described as *editors*, who imposed a new literary and theological pattern on the material they had received from tradition. That is, they created new large-scale 'literary' forms (like the Yahwist

15. A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament I*, Copenhagen: Gad, 1952, p. 106.

16. Koch, *Formgeschichte* (see n. 14 above) 98.

17. Cf. N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1969.

history, the Gospel, the New Testament Epistle) into which the orally shaped units of tradition were fitted.

Yet, even admitting this, it still remains true that the Bible is, by and large, "the written fixation of oral tradition;"<sup>18</sup> and when one speaks of the 'forms' of biblical literature, it is the pre-literary units of this oral tradition that are usually meant, the orally shaped stories and sayings which make up the vast bulk of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>19</sup> The forms of the Bible, then, are not really 'literary' forms: they are not the self-conscious forms of written literature, but the simple, spontaneous forms of oral speech.

### The Forms of Oral Tradition

Such forms grow out of the life of a people. They are "verbal compositions [which] stand in direct relation to life, and are themselves as it were events expressed in verbal forms."<sup>20</sup> A victory song is sung to welcome this particular hero home; a psalm is composed for that feast; a sermon is preached to this congregation. Because of this link to concrete events, and because, too, of its oral character, which implies transmission by memory, oral tradition tends to circulate in small units (a story, a saying, a short poem, a song....) And because all religious tradition tends to be conservative, while ancient pre-literary cultures have a strong community consciousness which discourages personal

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18. Bentzen, *Introduction* (see n. 15) 108.

19. In spite of some terminological confusion, specially in German which has two different words (*Gattung* and *Form*) for such categories the term 'Form' has a quite precise meaning in exegesis. It always stands for the set verbal pattern assumed by a basic unit of oral tradition.

20. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament — An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1965, p. 9.

forms of expression, the small units of oral tradition are usually transmitted in fixed, stereotyped (and so also easily remembered) forms. The forms of the Bible, then, will tend to be forms of small compass and fixed structure created by definite situations in the life of the Bible-bearing community.

Forms of this kind are not completely unknown to us even though in our post-Gutenberg age, oral tradition has been drowned out in an ocean of print. We get a fair idea of what forms of oral tradition are like from the forms we encounter in such popular sub-literature as the newspaper. A newspaper gives us a whole sheaf of such forms. On its front page we meet the 'news-report', couched in sober, factual language, and purporting to give us an accurate description of some recent event. A few pages further on there is the 'editorial', a very different kind of form. This does not report: it comments. Its language is not the unadorned, almost telegraphic prose of the news-report: it strives for roundness, elegance, force. Then there are advertisements everywhere, belonging to a distinctive and unmistakable form, which uses a variety of word and image patterns to persuade.

Each of these forms has its own recognizable literary structure and style, and these are geared to its own particular function. The news-report informs; the editorial educates opinion; the advertisement 'sells'. Depending on its function, each form too has its own inner logic, its own kind of truth. It would be unutterably naive to take the claims of an advertisement as an accurate 'news-report' on the product it is peddling. We judge a news-report by the accuracy of its information, but an editorial by the soundness of its analyses, and an advertisement by its power to persuade.

Like the forms in a newspaper, the forms in the Bible too have each a definite literary structure and a definite



function. A prophetic oracle ('Thus says the Lord') is very different from a parable ('The Kingdom of God is like...'), and a beatitude ('Blessed are the...') does not look like an apodictical law ('Thou shalt not...'). Each form provides for some particular need of the community. Psalms are composed to be sung in worship; legal sayings to legislate the behaviour of the community; and the Gospel stories about the controversies of Jesus (Mk 2:15-3:6 and 12: 13-37) may have provided the early Church with a pattern in its polemic against the Synagogue. In a word, each form has, to use a German technical term, now a common place of theological language, *Sitz im Leben*, that is a functional setting in the life of the community — in its cult, its preaching, its catechesis or its theological discussion.

But between the origin of a form in a definite *Sitz im Leben* and its appearance in the written Bible, there stretches a more or less extended period of time, during which the form is open to the shaping influences of oral transmission. Unlike the relatively stable forms of written literature, the forms of oral tradition are liable to change. They tend to grow more elaborate, and to become less pure, picking up structural elements from other forms to give various 'mixed forms'. So stories grow more detailed in the telling, as in Jn 18: 10f, which adds new details (*right ear*) and gives names (Peter, Malchus) to the anonymous protagonists of the story in Mk (14:47). Sayings are adapted to new needs. The Parable of the Lost Sheep in Lk 15:3-7 is addressed by Jesus to the Pharisees and the Scribes (15: 1), as his justification for associating with the untouchables of his day (15: 2). It calls attention to the *joy* of a shepherd who finds a lost sheep, in order to point out that 'there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (15: 7). But in Mt 18:10-14, the same parable is addressed to the disciples

as leaders of the Christian community (18: 1), and urges them to imitate the *perseverance* of the shepherd in looking after their errant 'little ones' (18: 10), because 'it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish' (18: 14).<sup>21</sup>

So the forms of the Bible have pre-literary history, and this history must be investigated if the forms are to be understood. Form Criticism, the scientific study of these pre-literary forms, cannot be content with just identifying and classifying the forms found in the Bible. It must also attempt to show how these forms developed in the pre-Bible oral tradition, and reconstruct the life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in Israel or the Church, in which they came into being.

### Form Criticism: The study of Biblical Forms

Form Criticism of the Bible goes back to H. Gunkel, the first to call for a literary history of the Old Testament, which, instead of trying to put its various literary complexes, like the Yahwist history, the Book of Jeremiah or the Psalter, into chronological order (an impossible task!), would, respecting the Bible's primarily oral character, aim at describing the origin and evolution of the units of oral tradition it contains.<sup>22</sup> "The literary history of Israel", claimed Gunkel, "is the history of Israel's forms." The Old Testament critic, then, would have to identify the

21. Cf. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (SCM Press, 1966), pp. 105-108.

22. Gunkel proposed this programme in an article entitled "Die Grundprobleme der Israelitischen Literaturgeschichte" (The Basic Problems of the History of Israelite Literature), which appeared in the *Deutschen Literaturzeitung* in 1906. Cf. H. J. Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*, Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956, p. 310.

23. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin 1913) 29, quoted in Kraus, *Geschichte* (see n. 22) 312.

various literary forms his book contains, describe the characteristics of each, trace back its history to its pre-literary stage, and find the setting in the daily life of Israel, in which the form had its living context.

Gunkel himself applied this method brilliantly in his great commentaries on Genesis (which he interpreted as a collection of *sagas*, that is, of "popular and poetic narratives about persons and things"),<sup>24</sup> and on the Psalms (which he classified into several carefully defined types: hymns or songs of praise, songs of individual or collective lament, songs of thanksgiving, and wisdom songs with a didactic content.)<sup>25</sup> And in the fifty or more years since, the identification of Old Testament forms has gone on apace. Eissfeldt's *Introduction to the Old Testament* describes some sixty of these forms (and his list is not exhaustive!) assumed by the "smallest units" of the pre-literary tradition. These include *prose-types* (like speeches, sermons, prayers, cultic or legal records, historical narratives, myths, legends, sagas), *sayings* of various kinds (legal sayings, cultic sayings, prophetic oracles, proverbs), and *songs* (victory songs, dirges, mocking songs, psalms, wisdom poem.)<sup>26</sup> The list alone is sufficient to suggest how rich a mosaic of variegated forms each 'book' of the Old Testament really is.

It took some twenty years for Form Criticism to pass from the Old Testament to the New. But following closely on Karl Ludwig Schmidt's demonstration that the Gospels,

24. H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910, p. viii.

25. H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926. This was followed by an *Introduction to the Psalms* (H. Gunkel *Einführung in die Psalmen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933.)

26. Eissfeldt, *Introduction* (see. n. 20) 12-127.

as we now have them, are not "single creations out of a whole cloth",<sup>27</sup> but contain stories and sayings from the oral tradition of the Early Church,<sup>28</sup> Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, the fathers of New Testament Form Criticism, published their seminal Form-Critical studies on the Synoptic Gospels<sup>29</sup>. Both pursued the basic aim of all Form Criticism, to "rediscover the origin and history of the particular units and thereby throw some light on the history of the tradition before it took literary form",<sup>30</sup> but each did this in his own way. Dibelius preferred to deduce the forms of the Gospel tradition *a priori*, from his reconstruction of the Early Church, whose life he summed up in the well known slogan: "In the beginning was preaching."<sup>31</sup> It is here, in early Christian preaching, taken in its widest sense, that Dibelius located the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel forms. The stories and sayings reported in the Synoptic Gospels had been shaped, Dibelius believed, in the catechetical instruction and the missionary preaching of the Early Church.

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27. The expression is N. Perrin's in his *Redaction Criticism* (see n. 17) 15.

28. See n. 12 above

29. M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* was published in Tübingen in 1919. The second German edition has been translated into English as *From Tradition to Gospel*, New York: Scribner's, 1935. R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921, has also (in its fourth German edition) been translated into English as *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963).

30. Bultmann, *Synoptic Tradition*, (see n. 29) 4. Bultman is here quoting (with approval) Dibelius, who used the words in a survey of form-critical studies published in *Theologische Rundschau* 1 (1929) 185-216.

31. Although widely believed to be an authentic Dibelius logion, this much quoted dictum cannot be found in any of his works, though it does, admirably, sum up his thinking. What Dibelius does say, in his *From Tradition to Gospel* (see n. 29) 70, is that "in the sermon the elements of the future Christian literature lay side by side as in a mother cell." Cf. Perrin, *Redaction Criticism* (see n. 17) 15, n. 19.



Bultmann is much less interested in the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel forms. His starting point was not the early Christian community, but the Gospel text as we have it today. A careful examination of the text in the light of contemporary Jewish and Greek literature enabled him to identify a number of forms, and he then attempted to trace the history of each, and to assign it to a setting in the life of the community<sup>32</sup>.

Because of the weaker oral character of the New Testament tradition (with its relatively short period of oral transmission, and that in a strongly 'literary' culture), and because its language, Greek, is less addicted to set formulae than is the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the forms of the New Testament are proportionately fewer, and are less clear-cut than those of the Old. Indeed, outside the Synoptic Gospels, Form Criticism has had very little success, though it has been able to identify a few forms—liturgical hymns (Phil 2: 6-11; Eph 1: 3-14), confessions of faith (I Cor 15:3-5), catalogues of virtues (Gal 5: 22f; Col 3: 12-14) or vices (Gal 5: 19-21; Col 3: 5-8)—in the New Testament Epistles and in Acts.<sup>33</sup>

But in the Gospels a number of forms have been convincingly identified by Form Critics. There are two important *narrative forms*: the pronouncement story, which is a story that climaxes in a saying of Jesus, and has no other function than to provide a setting for the saying (Mk 3: 31-35; 12: 13-17);<sup>34</sup> and the miracle story, a story told for

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32. Cf. Bultmann, *Synoptic Tradition* 5.

33. Cf. H. Zimmermann, *Neutestamentliche Methodologie*, Stuttgart Kath. Bibelwerk, <sup>2</sup>1968, pp. 160-68

34. The term 'pronouncement story' is Vincent Taylor's — Cf. his *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, London; Macmillan, 1949, p. 30. Dibelius prefers the term 'paradigm' and Bultmann calls it 'apophthegm' (pithy maxim).

its own sake, and describing, according to a stock three-act scheme (condition of the patient-healing action of Jesus-effect of the cure on the crowds) a healing or an exorcism worked by Jesus (Mk 1: 21-28)<sup>35</sup>. And there are several kinds of *sayings*: parables (Mt 13: 3-9), proverbs (Mt 12, 34: 24: 28), beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-12; 13: 16f), prophetic warnings (Mt 7: 22f; 10: 28), legal sayings (Mt 5: 21-48) and the like.<sup>36</sup>

These forms, like those of the Old Testament enumerated above, are not peculiar to the Bible. Some of the larger complexes of biblical literature, like the Yahwist history or the Gospels, are, indeed, specifically biblical types, called into being no doubt by the uniquely historical orientation of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. They have no parallels in contemporary literature. But the short pre-literary forms in which the bulk of the Bible is expressed are in no way the prerogative of Israel or the Church. They have their counterparts in Greek, Jewish and ancient Near-East literature—even though one has only to compare the demythologized creation story of Genesis with the cosmogonic myths of ancient Babylon,<sup>37</sup> or the prosaic miracle stories of the Gospels with the spectacular deeds ascribed to Hellenistic wonderworkers like Apollonius of Tyana,<sup>38</sup> to realize how

35. Cf. L. J. McGinley, "Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives", *Theological Studies* 2 (1941) 452-80; 3 (1942) 47-68; 203-30. V. Taylor in his *Gospel Tradition* (see n. 34) 119-41, is more positive in his assessment. Quite the best popular study of the miracles of Jesus we know of is R. H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles*, London: SCM Press, 1963.

36. Bultmann, *Synoptic Tradition* (see n. 29) 69-178. Bultmann's own popular exposition of his method is available in English in R. Bultmann and K. Kindsin, *Form Criticism*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962. V. Taylor's book mentioned above (n. 34) is more detailed and rather critical study.

37. Cf. H. Rechenkens, *Israel's Concept of the Beginning*, New York: Herder, 1964, 78-91.

38. Cf. L. Monden, *Signs and Wonders*, New York: Desclée, 1966 pp. 115-21; 266-67.

profoundly the message of the Bible has marked with its sobriety and religious earnestness the common forms it has used.

Still, the language of the Bible is not an esoteric or angelic tongue: it is the language of the people. God's word is unreservedly human. What Amos Wilder says of early Christian speech could be said of the Bible as a whole:

Thus whether as regards language as tongue or language as imagery and diction there should be no such thing as a 'language of Zion'. There is, indeed, such a thing as a rhetoric of faith, the language of the Spirit; one can recognize that the early Christians were endowed with new tongues; but all such heavenly discourse remains rooted in the secular media of ordinary speech. Pentecost, indeed, we may take as the dramatization of the fact that there is no peculiar Christian tongue.<sup>39</sup>

### The Significance of biblical Forms

Form critical studies of the Bible have completely changed our ideas about what the Bible is like. We can no longer think of the Bible as a dead 'book', or even as a collection of books, but only as the many-toned voice of God, speaking down the ages to (and through) his people, in the variegated and power-charged words of man. The study of biblical forms enables us to understand this voice, for the message it addresses to us is intelligible only if we are sensitive to the form in which it is expressed. Each form, we have seen, has its own truth, its own inner logic, its own language. A proverb is not a precept; a saga is not scientific history; a Gospel is not biography. We must not read into a form more than it intends to tell us; we must not ask it questions it is not meant to answer. Failure to do this will lead to misunderstandings as disastrous as that which led the learned consultors of the Holy Office, on that fateful 24

39. A. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* London: LCM Press, 1964, p. 28.

February 1616, to condemn as "foolish and absurd philosophically, and formally heretical, inasmuch as it expressly contradicts the doctrines of Holy Scripture in many places". the proposition that "the sun is the centre of the world and altogether devoid of local motion."<sup>40</sup>

But the study of biblical forms does more than just make the Word of God intelligible. It enables us not merely to understand the voice of God, but to *hear* it as a voice addressed to us. It recovers the 'spokenness' of God's Word. All language is ultimately a spoken word, for writing is only a system of visible signs for preserving the spoken word for generations to come, who must re-interpret the signs by 'reading' them, that is, by restoring the word to its spoken state. This is not as simple as it may seem. For writing, while it fixes the spoken word, inevitably freezes it too. The warmth and the immediacy of the spoken word are not easily expressed in 'cold print'. Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish film director of genius, shows himself well aware of this. "The only thing that can be satisfactorily transferred from that original complex of rhythms and moods", he writes, describing the making of a film, "is the dialogue and even dialogue is a sensitive substance which may offer resistance. One can write dialogue, but how it should be delivered, its rhythm and tempo, what is to take place between the lines—all this must be omitted for practical reasons"<sup>41</sup>.

Writing, in fact, can cope satisfactorily with only one of the three functions of language, its *symbolizing function*, its power to 'state', to convey ideas. It finds it more difficult to implement its *function of expression* (language as expressing

40. Cf. J. Brodrick, *Robert Bellarmine* Westminster: Newman Press 1961, p. 372.

41. Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screen Plays* New York: Simon & Schuster 1960, p. xvi.



the inner mood of the speaker), and almost impossible to embody its *function of address* (language as summoning the one spoken to, into the adventure of a personal encounter)<sup>42</sup>. But literary form can supply this inadequacy of the written word, because the form of a passage is an indication not so much of its intellectual content as of its tone. That is why, "when the form-critical method is applied by a true master, one with imagination and sympathy and insight...then we are able to listen to the speaking of Israel"<sup>43</sup>. Then indeed the Word of God comes to life, urgent and compelling, bursting into our deafness and summoning us to decision.

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42. Cf. Alonso-Schökel, *Inspired Word* (see n. 1) 134—50, on the three functions of language, and their relevance to the Bible.

43. J. Mulenberg, "The Gains of Form Criticism in Old Testament Studies", *Expository Times* 71 (1959/60) 229—33.

# The Word of God and Creation

## Part I: Relating life to God's Word

WHILE we men obviously have experience of the created world, many would deny any experience of the Creator or of His intervention in the affairs of our world. Even those who pass for believers may think of Him as an unknown Being who is remote from our world of time and space. Apparently He created the world, and will judge it on the last day. But is this more than a pious belief, an apparently respectable view held in the past, but hardly acceptable to the modern man?

### 1. Questioning the reality of God.

The Bible, from beginning to end, is a strong affirmation of the truth of God and of His constant decisive intervention in our world: "I am the first, and I am the last: there is no God but Me" (Isaiah 44: 6). Men in every age have tended to disagree, in actual practice more than in theoretical belief. Hence the question must be faced: Can a man fulfil himself and find meaning in his life by relying on himself alone and on his own resources? Is God a hypothesis which we have inherited from an unenlightened past, but which modern men of the space age can dispense with? This question ought to interest believers and unbelievers and doubters of all types. Whether God is admitted as true or not, thought of as the Source of all goodness or as the opium of the people, He is an inescapable problem: see Isaiah 8: 12f.

Our affirmations and negations regarding these ultimate questions need to be tested by the experiences of real life. Men have experience of work and fatigue, hunger and thirst,

love and joy, sickness and death. Their belief or lack of belief is supposed to be born of such experience and nourished by it.

## 2. Belief and practice, freedom and search.

All men pursue in their life certain cherished goals, and this is done on the basis of certain "beliefs." Some believe in personal success, others in the power of wealth, others in the rewards of human love. It is these beliefs about "reality" that give direction and motivation to their whole life and conduct. Each one thinks that his own idea of "reality" is true, is founded on facts. Still men differ so widely in their approach to life. What they think of the world and its goods depends on what they have made of themselves, on the meaning they have come to attach to their own existence. Our *freedom* of decision and action is surely involved in this process of our forming a view of ourselves, of our life and of the world of things and persons.

What is visible and tangible does not exhaust a man's capacity for life and experience, or his search for meaning. No ready answer can be found for the following questions. Why does the world exist, and we in it? What is its origin and its goal? We eat and drink and relax and love and sing and dance and die. What more are we capable of? What is our place and function in the universe? Are the answers to these questions much clearer to the learned than to the unlearned, to a civilized person than to the primitive forest-dweller? Can science and technique enable us to understand the ultimate meaning and real foundation of our life in the world? It is surely within our manifold experience of our life that the search for its ultimate meaning must be carried on. My questions about meaning are occasioned by my varied experiences, and the answers must be discovered as I go through them. This *could* be a discovery of God the Creator.

### 3. Moral earnestness and openness to the Real.

I could ignore these questions at least for a time, and refuse to put them seriously to myself. This may seem to make no difference to my life and activity. A man must live before he can ask ultimate questions. When he has achieved comfortable living, perhaps he feels no immediate need of further seeking and questioning. It is therefore only my purpose of taking my life seriously that obliges me to ask myself about "reality" and its foundation. Can I discover this ultimate foundation in the world itself, or in myself, or in humanity as a whole?

A possible temptation is to stand in awe of the grandeur of the material universe, to contrast my littleness with the immensity of space and time, and to conclude that I count for nothing (cf. Deut. 4: 19; Ps. 8). Man is mere dust, destined to disappear; he is only a link in the chain of the evolution of the material world. Perhaps the matter is not so simple as this. Neither science nor history tells me why the world exists, and why I exist, who am capable of knowledge and reflection. Nothing of all I know explains why anything should exist at all. Is atheistic humanism right when it holds that the world itself provides the conditions in which man can fulfil himself, or that the world is meaningless so that man is doomed to absurdity and despair? These positions are a denial of transcendence. Man's claim to self-sufficiency is highly questionable. Can he withdraw himself from the operation of the laws of nature and the changes of history, and triumph over the threat of decay and death and be master of his own destiny? If individuals cannot achieve this, how can humanity?

The fact remains that man, left to his own observation and reflection, is without an answer to the question about the ultimate meaning of his own life. He does not exist because the universe exists, which is not even spiritual, nor



does the universe exist because of man. Is there a Reality which cannot be reduced to man, or the universe, of which these are a created manifestation, and which establishes them and exceeds them? This question is inescapable.

#### 4. Man's uniqueness.

Man has only to meditate and analyse his own existential awareness to discover his own uniqueness. He is able to distinguish himself from the world and its history. He can rise above himself and his own environment. He can consider which among so many possible goals he ought to pursue. He enters freely into relationships with the world, and can control them even in the face of formidable natural and social pressures. He can examine his own motives, and weigh conflicting claims and responsibilities and loyalties. He makes at least some of his decisions, and can direct his own desires and impulses in the light of his knowledge of right and wrong. He can choose a course of action which worldly wisdom and material circumstances seem to rule out; he can judge himself and his conduct. He does not make his own laws, but is expected to follow the law written on his heart. His conscience bears witness for or against him, accusing him or excusing him (cf. Romans 2).

This means that life itself makes men examine the foundation and meaning of their own actions. They are obliged to ask themselves: What is truth? What is love and beauty? What are freedom and fulfilment? The "values" which a man recognises and which guide his thought and decision are not subject to his own will and caprice. A man who wishes to be truthful or loving is not simply following his own natural impulse, or conforming himself to social custom. He is freely and consciously responding, often at the cost of much self-sacrifice, to the mysterious call of life which invites him to transcend himself, and to recognise the demands of a Reality higher than himself and the will

of society. Thus man's questions about ultimate meaning are meant to lead him to an existential contact with the Reality which is at the foundation of human life.

### **The biblical witness to God.**

The whole Bible is, above all, an inspired witness to the reality of the God of creation and salvation and to His constant loving action in our life. Holy men are employed by God to give us a record of their own personal religious experience, so that this record might be a divine help towards our sharing in the same experience of God. This essential character of the Bible as a living witness to the living God is not always borne in mind by readers, and this must create serious difficulties in the way of a proper understanding of the biblical message. Where as we ought to concentrate on the nature of the witness to the one true God, we allow ourselves to be distracted by secondary and peripheral questions which the sacred authors themselves did not intend to treat or answer.

Thus the purpose of the Bible in speaking of creation is to affirm the truth of God's saving plan for mankind. It is concerned with a question which is primarily religious, not historical or scientific, solved by man's personal commitment to God in faith, and not by rational investigation. Treating of creation, the Bible affirms that God is the Eternal One who approaches His creature, man, in an existential encounter of grace and salvation, that God discloses Himself and His saving purpose to every man in the concrete situation of his life, so that man and his whole existence in the world can be renewed and elevated to a higher truly divine level through God's action (Ecclus. 17,18).

### **6. The Bible on the sin of the world**

The Bible also teaches that man, from beginning of his history, refused to welcome the God who approached him,

so that sin entered into man's world as a challenge to God and to the divine order He wished to establish. This order is called the Covenant, the reign of justice and righteousness and peace in our world, which is realised through men depending on God, and of which sin is the negation. If it is true that God enters into our life in order to share His life with us, wishing to be recognised and loved, our life is a mystery: it is characterised by this mysterious encounter with the Supreme being who cannot be understood by our reason alone. There is the added mystery of our sinful resistance to Him and a whole long history of this rebellion which has left its ugly marks on our world.

## **7. The need of personal involvement and commitment.**

Man is called upon not simply to analyse his situation dispassionately, but to commit himself to the mysterious presence and activity of God. God is not an object among objects to be apprehended by the human intellect or to be reasoned about, but a personal presence that demands that we relate ourselves personally to Him. We are called upon actively to respond to the challenge of the God who speaks and acts and invites, however mysteriously, through the very facts of our human or inhuman situation. We can know Him only as we freely submit ourselves to the impulse and attraction of His Spirit, so that our moral decisions are governed by this loving recognition of God, what the Bible calls the "fear" of God. The sin of Adam, and of every man, is to reject this "fear".

The mystery of our own little lives is taken up into the mystery of God Himself: our lives are hidden with God in the truth of his crucified and glorified Son. In this view a merely rational approach to the understanding of our life is not justified. It overlooks and ignores the dimension of mystery in our life. Behind the happenings of our earthly scene lies the mysterious reality of God Himself actively communicating Himself. The initiative in our knowledge of God lies with God Himself, not with us (cf. Isaiah 66-2).

Our hesitations and reservations about other people's witness to God, and about the biblical witness, do not dispense us from the need of personal involvement in the mystery of the human situation. By this means alone can we judge the correctness of other people's affirmations about God, and find our own suitable expression of the mystery of life. A person may seem to have excellent reasons for refusing to commit himself to the mysterious call contained in the human situation — the word of God addressed to him personally. But this refusal is his own responsibility: as long as he persists in it he is unable to verify the truth of the affirmations about God. God will remain for him a remote abstraction, an unintelligible concept, a perplexing hypothesis, blindly fought against or accepted unwillingly.

On the other hand, the person who makes his daily actions conform to the exigencies of God's loving demand, laid upon him mysteriously through the gift of the Spirit and interpreted to him by centuries of religious tradition and witness and reflection, will receive light and strength in the measure of his self-commitment and devotion. He will learn, in and through the very struggle of his communion with God, that He is truly love, that He is the only source of man's freedom and joy, that His love is stronger than death, and that He is the only foundation of man's existence and salvation, individual and collective. In God and through God the believer gains an understanding of the historical process directed towards the Day of final fulfilment, when the contradictions and anomalies of our present existence as pilgrims will be eliminated at last. He does not see this End — action of God as reserved for the future: he understands that it is already taking place in history, and finds it concentrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We must not think that such an insight into God's creative and salvific activity is strictly confined to the bible. In fact the Bible itself affirms the contrary. The purpose



of the account of the creation in *Genesis* is to teach that God has the same plan for all men, for all peoples. In every generation of mankind there have been just men who pleased God by the obedience of their faith, though the sin of the world constitutes everywhere a serious obstacle that needs to be surmounted.

“God, who through the Word creates all things (cf. Jn. 1, 3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (cf. Rom. 1: 19-20). Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Then after their fall His promise of redemption aroused in them in the hope of being saved (cf. Gen. 3, 15), and from that time on He ceaselessly kept the Human race in His care, in order to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (cf. Rom. 2, 6-7)” (Vatican II: On Revelation, 3).

Let us conclude this first part of our enquiry with a passage taken from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (III,7) where the Hindu sage tells us what he has discovered about God the Creator through his own personal commitment and reflection:

“He who, abiding in the earth, is other than the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, who controls the earth from within — he is the Self within you, the Inner Controller, the Immortal.....

“He who abiding in the mind, is other than the mind, whom the mind does not know, whose body is the mind, who controls the mind from within — he is the Self within you, the Inner Controller, the immortal.....

“He is the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood understander. No other seer than He is there, no other hearer than He, no other thinker than He, no other understander than He: He is the Self within you, the Inner Controller, the Immortal.”

## Part II: Relating God's word to life

### 1. The origin of the creation narratives of Genesis in the faith of the chosen people.

The doctrine of original sin affirms the reign of sin in our world. Mankind as a family are alienated from God, their Creator and Father. This means that they have lost the key to the right interpretation of their life-experience, so far as they do not avail themselves of God's redemptive grace.

A part of the purpose of God's special intervention in the life of the Hebrew people — His word addressed to them through the prophets and the Scriptures — was to provide them with the right interpretation of events, so that, through it, they might come to the clear recognition of the one true God, His love and His plan

The Israelite people had an experience of God intervening in their life through the prophet Moses, and rescuing them from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 14, 31; Deut. 26f 5f). During the mission of Moses, culminating in their deliverance and their miraculous escape into the Sinai desert, they had experience of the fact that the God, of whom Moses was the obedient instrument, is the absolute Lord of Nature. All the natural phenomena, ordinary and extraordinary were at His command: He could make use of them, of plague and pestilence, of hailstorm and east wind, to overcome the hard obstinacy of the Pharaoh and to bring deliverance to His oppressed people. By His timely intervention in every apparently insoluble crisis, He created and strengthened the faith of His own people.

Their faith in His lordship of Nature was further strengthened by their experience of His timely succour during their wandering in the desert and their subsequent invasion of Palestine. He came to their rescue in unsuspected ways, and their courage, inspired by Him, proved equal to every trial. As long as they relied on Him, they

were stronger than their enemies, and no situation proved too desperate: see Ps. 105 (104).

First came, therefore, the experience of God as the Lord of history, who revealed Himself through words and deeds, to whom all peoples and all lands were perfectly subject. He spoke to His people through His deeds of deliverance and guidance, and they gained the certainty that He ruled the course of human history, that history is the scene of His intervention and activity, that no power on earth or in heaven can resist Him. History was meaningful because it had a place in His purpose and plan.

It could not have been so hard for the confirmed believer to realise that God could not be the Lord of history unless He was the absolute Lord of Nature, which means the Creator and sovereign Ruler of the world. The recognition of God as the Creator of heaven and earth was therefore the result of a deepening of the faith in the God of Abraham who had specially manifested Himself to His people through the prophets. That the other peoples of the world, who were not the beneficiaries of a special prophetic revelation, were slow to arrive at a similar clear recognition of God as Creator and Saviour and Lord and Father and Guide is a measure of the darkness of sin in our world.

These facts throw much light on the creation narrative. We see clearly that it is based on inspired religious reflection in the context of a new-found faith rather than on any kind of rational investigation into the remote origins of mankind. In the past, interpreters who failed to recognise clearly this true character of the narrative, have approached it as if it were a historical report, and have consequently run into insoluble difficulties of interpretation.

## 2. Creation understood as the opening of salvation history.

The purpose of the author of Genesis is to impart religious teaching, not historical information about the "beginnings."

In fact, he nowhere claims to be possessed of such unlikely information, provided we understand the kind of account he has given us. He is solely concerned with professing his faith in the God of Israel as Creator and universal saviour, and throwing some light on His plan of salvation. His main affirmation is one of faith, not of history or science: the whole cosmos with its human inhabitants is to be traced back to God's gracious initiative of creation and salvation. All the details of the whole narrative belong strictly to the context of this faith-affirmation.

It is the experiential awareness of God as Saviour that enables the sacred author to pass to the recognition of Him as almighty Creator. This means that a firm grasp of the mystery of the God beside whom there is no other, includes the grasp of the truth of creation. The appearance of man on earth was not simply a stage in the progress of natural evolution; it was the deliberate opening of the history of salvation by the Almighty: "Let Us make man...." The question of *when or how* in terms of natural evolution the universe came into being, is entirely outside the scope of the sacred author's consideration.

The merit of the account consists in the fact that a pure conception of the God of revelation, the God of loving self-communication, has reacted upon the author's entire conception of man's place in the material universe. This explains the simplicity and dignity, the certainty and consistency, the depth and grandeur of the whole account. The author's dynamic faith has saved him from the pantheistic and polytheistic and monistic errors of merging God in creation, and of merging creation in God, and from the philosophical error of reducing God to the status of a distant prime Mover.

### 3. The relevance of the truth of creation.

In speaking of creation the sacred author was not



formulating an abstract doctrine, or indulging in speculation for its own sake. He was communicating his own experience of the living God, indicating to the faithful the firm foundations of their present relationship with God. Consequently the idea of God as the Saviour and Support of His people is much more prominent in the Bible than the idea of God as Creator. The salvation idea comes first; the creation idea is its corollary. They combine to produce the practical insight that everything in the time-process is directly subject to the will of the God who freely and graciously initiated the process, and still sustains it unerringly. He cannot be absent from man's world which He has made His very own. To man and to the whole creation He has appointed a time and a season and a glorious End, assured to them not by inexorable laws, but by the sheer grace of God.

#### **4. The truth of creation grasped only by faith.**

The specific issues with which the biblical view of creation is concerned, are those for which neither science nor philosophy can offer an ultimate explanation or proof—namely, creation as an expression of a mysterious divine initiative of love, which in its turn is understood by man not through his reason but through divine revelation. A conflict between science or philosophy and the biblical faith cannot occur unless one discipline or another oversteps its proper limits. For instance, if a scientist advocates some philosophical theory of materialism or determinism, the fault is not with science, but with the man who seeks to justify his claim to self-sufficiency under the pretext of scientific truth. Unjustified theological positions also could create difficulties.

#### **5. Interpreting the creation narrative and grasping its message.**

We need to distinguish three different elements in this narrative:- a) religious truths; b) human events or physical

facts involved in the religious truths; c) details of presentation of these truths and facts which belong to the literary form.

The religious truths, conveyed through the narrative, deal with the perennial problems of human destiny, and are everywhere presupposed by the rest of the Bible. They teach that man is constituted in his true nature only by a personal relationship of obedience to God. Man is created in the image of God, that is, with the capacity and the vocation of holding converse with God, of freely responding to the summoning Word of God, and of co-operating with the Spirit of God (cf. Wisdom 9).

The image of God in man makes him a social being. God's plan is that man is to reach fulfilment through companionship with his fellowmen (Gen. 2, 18f). The all-decisive relationship with God is to be realised in and through the love and service of fellow human beings. Man could remain open to God only by remaining open to other people. Further, God's plan was that man should dominate the powers of Nature and utilise them through dependence on God Himself (Gen. 1, 28; 2, 15). Thus, in all this, man's relationship with God stands out as *the* foundation. If this is broken, the whole nexus of man's other relationships must be upset: it would mean the radical destruction of that peace and harmony for which man was created. Material Nature and its laws would remain unchanged; but man and his utilisation of Nature would change radically through rebellion against God with utterly tragic consequences.

The ground of the author's teaching about an original fall having actually occurred is surely his awareness of the universal sinfulness of mankind, and of that groaning of the whole universe of which St. Paul speaks (Rom. 8, 19f). This means that the divine life, to which we are called, does not come to us through our descent from the first Adam, By his disobedience he disqualified himself from acting as

the spiritual head of mankind. We are therefore to be re-born into Godlikeness through our freely choosing to be incorporated in the second Adam, Jesus Christ (cf. I Cor. 15, 45f).

## 6. More about interpretation.

The difficulty of interpreting the creation narrative arises not so much from the religious truths as from the facts and events and the world-picture involved in the presentation. The comparatively recent discovery of large amounts of ancient religious literature—Mesopotamian, Phoenician, and Egyptian—has helped us considerably to understand the literary forms used by the Hebrew authors. The material setting of the creation story and its details are not to be understood literally as a matter of historical information; they have a symbolic significance; they are carefully devised for the purpose of serving as a vehicle for religious truths; nearly all these details have their parallels in ancient religious literature. The careful reader will find quite clear evidence that shows that the sacred author had no thought of writing history, or of achieving historical accuracy. What he has done is rather to give us the fruit of his meditation on God's plan for man and the concrete conditions of sin and grace under which it is being realised.

## 7. Some vital biblical texts on the subject of creation.

The study we have made ought to enable us to appreciate more deeply the scattered biblical texts that deal with the question of creation in one way or another. Before we conclude let us have a brief look at some of the most typical of these texts. A passage from the Book of Job reminds us that creation is a mystery which we cannot grasp by our own acumen: God asks:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?  
Tell me, if you know and understand....

Who set its corner-stone in place?  
Who watched over the birth of the sea?...” (38, 4f)

God is known from His creation.

“The greatness and beauty of created things gives us a corresponding idea of their Creator” (Wisdom 13:5).

God is only understood through our becoming converted and humbly receiving His gracious self-manifestation in our life:

“All that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God Himself has disclosed it to them” (Rom. 1)  
“The living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them...has not left you without some clue to His nature, in the kindness He shows: He sends you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons,.....” (Acts 14:15f).

The need of the self-commitment of faith on our part is clearly stated in *Hebrews*:

“By faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God...” (11:3).

Man has the dreadful possibility of bartering away the true God for a false one, and offering reverence and worship to created things instead of to the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:25). Hence the psalmist prays for the grace of realising his creatureliness:

“Lord: let me know my end,  
and the number of my days....” (39:4).

If believers have an unshakable faith in the future consummation of God’s work of universal salvation, this is because they know Him as the Creator of heaven and earth, through whom all things came to be, without whom no single thing came to exist, whom nothing escapes, who governs and guides all things and persons with a sure hand:

“Thus speaks the Lord who is God...  
He who fashioned the earth and all that grows in it,  
Who gave breath to its people:  
I, the Lord, have called you with righteous purpose,



and taken you by the hand:

I have formed you and appointed you  
to be a light to all peoples..." (42, 5f).

"Why have you forgotten the Lord, your Maker,  
who stretched out the skies and founded the earth?

Why are you continually afraid all the day long?..." (51,13).

Creation was God's first gift to man in Jesus Christ. It was the first shining of the light which was to brighten into the noon-day splendour of the Light of Christ, the Light of the world. "The same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine', has caused His light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation—the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Cor. 4,6.).

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# The Word of God and History

"Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your family and and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing. I will bless those who bless you: I will curse those who slight you. All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you.' So Abram went as Yahweh told him" (Gen. 12:1-4 a).

HERE we have the best expression of the word of God and its relation to history, first of all the history of Israel and ultimately the history and destiny of 'all the tribes of the earth' (v.3b). The word of God which created heaven and earth, and directed the early history of the human race through its catastrophic development (Gen. 1-11), is now presented as beginning a new history, the history of salvation. Characteristic of this new beginning is the creative aspect of the word of God, the word of God as creating a history out of the absolute unworthiness of mankind. This is symbolically presented in the last story of the Primeval History, the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), where we see God thwarting the human ambition to build a tower with its top in the heavens. Once it is proved that nothing good can be expected from this sinful humanity, God inaugurates a new Dispensation through the call to Abraham<sup>1</sup>. What Abraham is asked is to believe,

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1. For elaborate treatments of the concept of word of God in the Old Testament cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament II* (ET), London, 1967, pp. 69-70; P. Van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*, Tournai, 1954, pp. 200-207; E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, New York, 1958 pp. 127-135; TH. C. Vrielen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, Oxford, 1966, pp. 93-96; O. Procksch, art. *lego* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV, pp. 91-100; A. Robert, art. "La parole divine dans l'Ancien Testament" in *Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Suppl) V, col. 442-465; J. L. McKenzie, "The Word of God in the Old Testament" in *Myth and Realities*, London, 1963, pp. 37-58.

to submit himself to God's plan, to go out of his country, to go out of himself. What he is promised is something humanly impossible, that he should be the father of a nation, that the nation to be born from him will inherit a land. Since it was humanly impossible, it was divinely possible and humanly meaningful, in so far as it served as the basic condition and requirement on the part of man to arrive at salvation.

### A History Guided by the Word

The history of Israel is a history that is guided by the word of God.<sup>2</sup> The story of the patriarchs all too clearly brings out this fact: that at no point was it directed by human calculation. Nay more, what God demanded often, ran counter to what man could conceive of, as is clear from the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). As Paul in the Letter to the Romans and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews explain it, here it was a question of Abraham relying on the word he had already believed in; of his ability to hope against hope, fully convinced that God had power to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:21) and even to raise Isaac the dead back to life (Hb. 11:16). The stories of Isaac and Jacob and the other patriarchs, for all their ambiguities and obscurities, make it clear that all of them wanted to have God's plan accomplished in their history. Though the general development of the history of Israel seemed to contradict God's plan, especially when the children of Israel were led to Egypt, the Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that the history of Israel was always fed and led by God's word, and its progress regulated and guided by the same word. Joseph's words before his death are reminiscent of the power of faith Israel had to see and evaluate various historical developments as planned and ordained by God's word for the good of Israel: "The

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2. J. L. McKenzie, *op. cit.* p. 51

evil you planned to do me has by God's design been turned to good" (Ex. 50; 20).

After the Israelites had been in Egypt for many years, again the word of God took the initiative to redeem them and bring them back to the Promised Land: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow" (Ex. 3;7-8). The entire description of the story of this deliverance given in the form of a cultic legend (Ex.1-15), is unique in its insistence on the guiding power of the word of God communicated by Yahweh through Aaron and Moses. The conclusion of the story of the deliverance runs thus: "Israel witnessed the great act that Yahweh had performed against the Egyptians, and the people venerated Yahweh; they put their faith in Yahweh and in Moses, his Servant" (Ex. 14;31). It is this same word of Yahweh that directed the people to the foot of Mount Sinai, there to inaugurate a Solemn Covenant between Yahweh and Israel as the basis of an everlasting relationship between them. Here the word became an event, and the concrete expression of this was given in the words of the covenant, the Decalogue and the Covenant Code (Ex. 20-23). These words were to guide and direct the history of Israel and mould them into a people characterised by God's presence in their midst. The covenant was the everlasting symbol of the living character of the word of God powerful enough to raise a nation to the level of being God's own people, a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19;4-6).

Once they were made the people of Yahweh through the covenant, their subsequent history is further proof of how Yahweh directed it and their destiny through his



omnipotent word.<sup>3</sup> In the review of the history of the people coming from Egypt and of their wanderings, in the historical introduction to Deuteronomy (Dt. 1-3), the word of God is said to guide the Israelites at each step from Horeb to Canaan (Dt. 1:6; 2:2; 18:31; 3:1; 27-28). At every stage in the occupation of the Promised Land we find the conquering word of God defeating their enemies, giving their land to his people and thus fulfilling the promises made to the Fathers. After they had taken possession of the land Yahweh spoke to the people through Joshua, this time challenging them to make a final decision for or against Yahweh (Jos. 24; 2-13). During the time of the Judges the same word of God was addressed to these leaders who were appointed to deliver Israel from her enemies. The calling of Samuel ends the period of the Judges and opens the period of the monarchy (1 Sam. 3). Here the word of Yahweh authenticates the desire of the Israelites for a king (1 Sam. 8:7) and designates Saul as the king (1 Sam. 9:7, 10, 17-24). It was the same word of God which later rejected Saul (Sam. 15:10) and selected David as his successor (1 Sam. 16:12). During his reign the word of God given through Nathan establishes the eternity of the dynasty of David (2 Sam. 7:1-16). Later, however, it was the word of Yahweh through the same Nathan which set in motion the series of disasters following David's sins of adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12: 1-12). The word of Yahweh to Jeroboam caused the division of the kingdom of Israel into two (1 Kgs 11:31ff). So also the word of Elijah announced and effected the fall of house of Ahab (1 Kgs. 19: 1-7; 21:17-24). When Judah was invaded by the Assyrians, the word of Yahweh to Isaiah declared and accomplished the deliverance of Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 19: 20-24). Thus the dynamic and powerful character of the word of God was something felt and experienced by his people throughout

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3. W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.* p. 72

their history. We could even say that their history was itself the word of God, insofar as it was a reality that realized and fulfilled the utterance and word of Yahweh. History is the revelation of the purpose of Yahweh; more than that it is the revelation of the character and personality of God whose word it is.<sup>4</sup> The word and the history affirm not only the thing signified but also the person who utters the word and realizes it in history.

### The Prophets and the Word of God

The prophets were men chosen by Yahweh to administer the word of God within the history of Israel in a very significant manner.<sup>5</sup> The power of the word of God as experienced and expressed by them is one of their most distinguishing features. Of the 241 occurrences of the expression "Word of Yahweh" in the Old Testament, 225 refer to this word as received or declared by a prophet. Hence it is a technical term for the prophetic experience. This is also true of similar expressions, such as "Words of Yahweh" or 'word' used without the genitive relationship with Yahweh.

While the earlier prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, relied greatly upon prodigious works and extraordinary ways of acting, the later prophets based their strength upon the power of the word of God. According to Jer. 18:18: "Instruction (*Torah*) shall not pass from the priest, nor advice from the wise, nor the word from the prophet." Whereas the priests were concerned with the *torah*, the written word of God, and its static interpretation, the prophets administered the living word of God which had to be applied to the varying circumstances of Israel's history. The most frequent phrase for expressing the prophetic experience is "the word of Yahweh came to such and such a prophet." Yahweh put his word in the mouth of Jeremiah

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4. W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.* p. 74

5. Cf. G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* II (ET), London, 1965, pp. 80-95.

(Jer. 1:9). It was the conscious possession of this word which distinguished the true prophet from the false, the genuine revelation of God from human invention and insinuations. As such, it was the joy and delight of the prophet (Jer. 15:16).

All the same, to be a minister of the word was not always a cause of joy. The prophets as the ministers of the word, had to fulfil a function in the history of Israel, that was demanding and excruciating. To announce the word of Yahweh to an incredulous and ungrateful people made Jeremiah a reproach and a derision. As a result, he tried to withhold the word and to keep silence. But he could not but speak, for the word was like a burning fire in his heart, imprisoned in his bones, which he would not bear any more" (Jer. 20:9). So he poured out the word on the people (Jer. 6:11).

Isaiah, the prophet whose teaching was sealed up in the heart of his future disciples (Is. 8:16), possessed an enduring faith in the power of God's word; and he demanded the same unquestioning faith in God's word from his hearers. His own eyes of faith had recognized a divine energy hidden beneath every event, whether political or social. Astonishing effects were to emerge almost out of nothing, simply because God's word had promised that they would happen (Is. 7:14)—a new life for the Davidic dynasty sprouting from a dead stump (Is. 11:1). Over against the infidelity and apostasy of the people Jeremiah pronounced God's word which was to inaugurate an era of the New Covenant (Jer. 31: 31-34).

The power of the prophetic word is obviously seen in Deutero-Isaiah in his promise of restoration to the people in the exile. Starting with his word of consolation (Is. 40, ff), the whole prophecy is a unique contribution to the understanding of God's word in the history of Israel. The prophet contrasts the transitoriness of the human situation

with the eternal validity of the word of God and says: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains for ever" (Is. 40:8). It is this word the efficacy and power of which are described through a beautiful comparison with the rain and snow. "As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (Is. 55:10-11). In the same way as the rain and the snow have a mission in the world as the infallible forces of nature, the word of God is endowed with a reality. Obviously it was for the restoration of the people that the word was sent and the joyous rhythms of this deliverance can be heard throughout this prophetic piece (Is. 40-55).

In fact, Deutero-Isaiah contributed very much to the theology of the word of God by combining creation and salvation as closely united events, by seeing creation as the beginning of the history of salvation and by explaining the eschatological meaning of creation. He depicts God's word with a rich vocabulary, a masterly style, and an intuitive grasp, which surpass those of any previous prophet. God's word is hurled from the mountain-tops by "heralds of good news" (Is. 40:9) or whispered in the heart of Jerusalem to comfort the people (Is 40:2). God speaks and at the touch of his word the desert wilderness is covered with the luxuriant shade of cedars, oleasters and cypresses (Is 41:17-20). The word levels uneven ground and turns rugged heights into delightful valleys (Is. 40:4). When the poor and the needy ask for water, God answers their prayer by the power of his word (Is. 41:17).

With these powerful expressions of the word of God before us, it is clear that the prophetic experience of the word is much more than a hearing of God's word; rather it



is a powerful participation in the personality of God. When Yahweh posits the word through the prophet, nothing can prevent its accomplishment. It is more than a question of prediction-fulfilment. The word of the prophet is like fire like a hammer that shatters rock (Jer. 23, 29). The word of the prophet can also build up and reestablish what is broken and shattered.

### The meaning of the Word of God

The above analysis of the word of God in the history of Israel brings us to a consideration of the meaning and significance of the word of God against its Near-East background. In the ancient Near-East the spoken word was conceived as a distinct reality laden with power. This was particularly true of the divine word. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine word was a creative force educating the world into existence. Similarly the human word was a being endowed with power. The power of the human word was most clearly manifested in solemn utterances such as blessings, curses, contracts, promises, and other processes that were intended to stabilize human relations. The belief in the power of the word seems to reflect a pre-literary culture in which there were no written records to preserve the spoken word. The spoken word was an externalization of the person, which was supposed to outlive the person himself. In such utterances as blessings, curses, promises, threats, wishes, commands and contracts, the word had a reality that endured into the future.

The word posits a reality and it is, in itself, the reality that it posits. The reality exists first in the heart, then passes into speech, and finally the effective speech brings into existence the reality that it signifies. In this conception, the power of the word is rooted in the person. When the person speaks, he externalizes himself. The permanence and energy of personal volition reach the external world

through the spoken word, and the spoken word retains these qualities of permanence and energy. In the case of the word of Yahweh, it does not always realize itself all on a sudden. Once uttered, the word is posited outside of God in human history. It will infallibly fulfil itself, and the full reality will be that designated by the word.

This complex and concrete meaning of the word is well brought out by the Hebrew term for Word: *dābār*. *Dābār* means not only *word*, but also *thing*. It is a reality created and effected and sent into the world to have its effects. It is a dynamic entity. As word and thing the word of God operated in the history of Israel and led it through its various historical vicissitudes.

The dynamic and reality-aspect of the word of God received greater attention in the post-exilic period, where we see the personification of the divine word in the midrashic narrative of the Exodus from Egypt (Wis. 18:14-16). Moreover, the law (*Torah*) is identified with the word, and it is seen as a lamp to the feet and a light to the path (Ps. 119: 105). It is the source of saving wisdom for man's life (Prov. 1:3; 6:23; Sir. 1:5), and his supreme hope (Ps. 119: 49, 74, 81, 114). It is a nourishment to men (Wis. 16:26). Men lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Dt 8:3). Faith in the vital significance of the word of God in human history and man's life causes men to feel a real hunger for it. It is the hunger about which Amos speaks as a punishment inflicted by God in human history when he deprives mankind of the nourishment of his word: "See what days are coming—days when I will bring famine on the country, a famine not of bread, a drought not of water, but of hearing the word of Yahweh. They will stagger from sea to sea, wander from north to east, seeking the word of Yahweh and failing to find it" (Am. 8:11-12).

This rich theology of the divine word attains its perfect realization only in the revelation of the perfect *word of God*, Jesus Christ, who is the word-made-flesh, the word-event, the perfect *dâbâr* of God. Jesus is the last and perfect word of the Father (Hb. 1:1-2), the one who was in the beginning with God and who was God, the word that became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:1-14). Through his words and deeds Jesus disseminated the saving power of the Word that he was. For this reason Christ's words are said to be 'spirit and life', meaning that for man they are the source and cause of the true and superior life which is eternal and divine. "He who hears my word and believes in him who sent me, has eternal life.....(Jn. 5:24). That is why Peter said to Christ: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the holy One of God" (Jn. 6:68-69). Jesus is thus the Word of the Father which effected the salvation of the whole human race and transformed it. It is no more a question of a political deliverance as was the case in the deliverance from Egypt; rather it is the definitive, spiritual revitalization of the human race, a process that has to continue till the end of time through the power of the Word-made-Flesh.

The Word of God is thus the nerve and the hinge of biblical history.<sup>6</sup> The various narratives which constitute the Old Testament and New Testament history are linked together by the co-ordinating theme of the word of God. It is within the framework of this word that the whole Bible is written. As a collection of events, all controlled and regulated by the word of God, the Bible is called the word of God, the written record of the accomplished word of God in history. As the *dâbâr* of God, as word and thing, the word of God in the Bible is the concrete and written form of

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6. A. Robert, *art. cit.*, p. 449

the words and deeds of God which constitute God's revelation in the history of salvation. The word of God in the Bible is not only the record of the spoken word of God: it is also the record of the acted word. The totality of God's words and deeds recorded in the Bible constitutes what we call the *word* of God. The deeds manifesting and confirming the realities signified by the words, and the words proclaiming the deeds and clarifying the mystery contained in them, together form the *word* in the Bible (DV2). This is true both of the Old Testament and the New Testament, in the history of Israel and in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the word in the Bible continues to influence all those who come into contact with it.

The word of God in history still continues to confront us, the believers of today.<sup>7</sup> It confronts us in the form of the written word in the Bible with its saving, challenging and consoling aspects. Since the "word is something alive and active" (Hb. 4:12), it can still speak to us and direct us in our way of salvation. In fact, it is the duty of every believer to turn to this word of God in the Bible and try to get inspiration and nourishment therefrom. There, in the Bible, the believer of today will see the great march of events, all of which are conditioned and controlled by the word of God. They will, in turn, help the believer and encourage him to turn to the same word of God as to the source of his own life and history.

Apart from the word of God in history written down in the Bible, the believers confront the same word in the various situations of their lives. They hear the word in the liturgy, in the preaching of the word of God. The purpose

7. Cf. Augustin Cardinal Bea, "The pastoral value of the Word of God" in *Contemporary New Testament Studies*, (ed. Sr. M. R. Ryan), Collegeville, 1965, pp. 31-38; Idem, *The Word of God and Mankind*, Chicago, 1967, *passim*.



of the preaching is therefore to enable the believers to allow their lives to be controlled and regulated by the word of God. They hear the word in the sacraments: the forgiving word in the Sacrament of Penance, the sanctifying word in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, a confirming word in the Sacrament of Confirmation, a healing word in the Sacrament of the anointing of the sick, a consecrating word in the Sacraments of Baptism, Matrimony and Holy Orders. With these various aspects of the word of God to nourish and support him, the believer should grow in his Christian commitment and learn to have recourse to this word in all his needs and problems.

Moreover, the word of God still speaks to the believers in the innermost recesses of their hearts. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son, continues to speak to us in words that cannot be translated into human language. Beyond and apart from the structures and conventions of the Church, the Spirit is there to convey and communicate the word of God to each individual believer. It is this word whispered in the heart of the believers that enables them to realize that they are the children of God, authorized to address God as "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15).

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# Jesus as the Word in the New Testament

IN the New Testament only three texts apply the term 'Word' to Christ as a proper name, and all the three texts belong to the Johannine writings, namely, Jn 1, 1-18; 1 Jn 1, 1 and Rev. 19, 13. If in the Book of Revelation Jesus is the 'Word of God', in the first Epistle of John He is the 'Word of Life' and in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, He is simply the 'Word'. Our task here is to investigate the doctrinal import of this Christological title in these texts, which will in its turn clarify the picture of Jesus as the Word in the New Testament.

Speaking of the title 'Word' applied to Jesus, authors usually tend to either a purely intellectualistic interpretation referring to the spiritual generation of the Second Person of the Trinity<sup>1</sup> or to a purely functional interpretation, referring to the function of Jesus as Revealer, excluding all metaphysical and Trinitarian interpretation<sup>2</sup>. Again, those who give a purely functional interpretation, find three different functions exercised by the Word in the three Johannine texts. J. Dupont synthesizes the doctrine of the three Johannine passages about the 'Word' thus: "Through his role in creation (Gospel) He is the creative Word; through his role in the history of Salvation (1 Jn) he is the Word of Life; through his role he is going to play in the end of times as the instrument of the divine vengeance against the impious (Revelation) he is the exterminating

1. Cf. L. Richard, "Fils de Dieu," *DTC* Col. 2407-2476.

2. Cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, London 1963<sup>2</sup>, 249f; E. Tobac, "La Notion du Christ Logos dans la Littérature Johannique", *RHE*, 25 (1929), 213-238; J. Dupont, *Essais sur la Christologie de Saint Jean*, Bruges, 1951, 11-18.

Word. Thus the notion of the Word qualifies the Son of God in each of his main interventions in the world and in the history of humanity"<sup>3</sup>. But the Johannine concept of Jesus as the 'Word' does not seem to allow such exclusive distinctions between the 'being' and the 'function' of Jesus or also between the different functions of Jesus.

### The 'Word' in the Gospel of John

We begin with the Prologue. In Jn 1, 1 we have three statements regarding the 'Word': "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The expression 'in the beginning' reminds us of the beginning of the Book of Genesis. Thus it refers to the time when created things did not exist. But it implies also that it is a beginning of something, namely, of creation and the subsequent history. So the Word is said to exist right at the beginning of history. Hence in the first statement we have an affirmation of the pre-existence and the transcendence of the Word of God.

The second statement says: "The word was with God." This shows that the Word is distinguished from Him who is called God, and is defined as someone who is with Him.

The third statement says: "and the Word was God". He is God in the same way as the One with whom He is. Here we have an affirmation of the divinity of the word. In v. 2 all these statements are resumed synthetically: "He was in the beginning with God". This shows that John wants to insist here on the nature of the Word, who is pre-existent, transcendent and divine, in his relation to God. The understanding of this relation to God is of utmost importance for a right understanding of the very title 'Word' for Jesus.

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3. Cf. J. Dupont, *Essais* ..... 16-18.

The particles 'with' (*pros*) and 'in' (*eis*) have always a dynamic sense in John, implying a movement towards something or someone<sup>4</sup>. So in this context it seems to speak of a personal relation of the Word to God, namely, the filial relation of the Son to the Father. We give below the structure of the Prologue, which will be of help in this regard:

A	vv. 1- 2	In the beginning WAS the Word.. WAS WITH God... WAS God...WITH God.
B	3	All things WERE MADE THROUGH HIM... MADE
C	4- 5	In Him...life...light of men...not RECEIVE it
D	6- 9	There...WITNESS...COMING INTO...
E	10	He was in the World...WAS MADE...did not...
F	11	He came ..RECEIVED HIM not
F <sup>1</sup>	12-13	But who RECEIVED HIM...born of God.
E <sup>1</sup>	14	And the Word WAS MADE flesh...among us.
D <sup>1</sup>	15	John...WITNESS TO...COMING...
C <sup>1</sup>	16	From his fullness...RECEIVED...grace...
B <sup>1</sup>	17	THROUGH ..given WAS MADE THROUGH Jesus...
A <sup>1</sup>	18	No one...GOD...the Only Begotten..IS WITH Father.

A concentric structure of the Prologue is admitted by many<sup>5</sup>, though in details they do not agree. The prologue forms a literary unit in which four words constitute the decisive elements occurring constantly and concentrically, marking each stage of development. These words are: Was (is), Were (was) made, Come, and Receive. If 'was' or 'is'

4. Cf. I de la Potterie, "L'emploi dynamique de 'eis' dans S. Jean et ses incidences théologiques", *Biblica*, 43 (1962), 366-387; especially pp. 379-387.

5. Cf. M. E. Boismard, *Le Prologue de Saint Jean*, Paris, 1953. 107; P. Lamarche, "Le Prologue de Jean", *RSR* 52 (1964), 529-532.



(AA<sup>1</sup>) marks the situation of the Word in his relation to God or the Father, 'were (was) made' (BEB<sup>1</sup>E<sup>1</sup>) marks his role in the history and economy of salvation. The 'come' (DD<sup>1</sup>) marks his decisive intervention in the economy of salvation—his coming to the world, while 'receive' (CFC<sup>1</sup>F<sup>1</sup>) marks the acceptance of his coming on the part of man and its effects.

In the light of the above structure we see that vv. 1- and 18 are parallels and form an inclusion to the Prologue. In v. 18 the Word becomes the only Begotten Son of the Father. There also he is contemplated in his relation to the Father. He is said to be in the bosom of the Father. 'In' (*eis*) again is dynamic in John. So it has to be explained not psychologically but theologically. It refers to the dynamic relation existing between the Father and the Son. The image of the 'bosom' and the name 'Father' both indicate that it is the Father-Son relationship that is envisaged here. It is not the metaphysical speculation about the relationships within God—the Son proceeding from the Father—that is of interest. It is the constant orientation of the Son to the source of his Life—the Father. It is through this quality that the Son can reveal the Father (v. 18). This is the same as is said of the Word in v. 1, i.e., this dynamic filial relation to the Father enables him to play his role in the economy of salvation.

This shows that a simple reducing of the Johannine affirmation in Jn 1:1-2 to purely Trinitarian relations does not do full justice to the Johannine theology. He who was in the beginning with God is just the same one whose story the whole Gospel tells, whose life in the flesh is the centre of the history of divine revelation and salvation. The simple Trinitarian interpretation regarding the 'Word' in these verses is occasioned also by v. 3 of the Prologue. "All things were made through him, and without him was

not made anything''. A reference is seen here to the creation of the universe, with the 'Word' as an exemplary cause. But to see the creation exclusively in v. 3 is also open to question. The verb that is used is '*egeneto*' and not '*ktizw*' (cf. Col. 1:15; Rev. 4:11;10:6) or '*poiew*'. When we look at the parallel sentence v. 17 we find there the same verb '*egeneto*' with the same construction ('*dia*' with genitive) "Grace and Truth came to be through Jesus Christ". The word '*ginomai*' has in the Prologue itself a broader meaning, namely, it is applied to the world of men (v. 10), to John the Baptist (v. 6) and to Christ himself (vv.14-15). On the other hand, in the OT the work of revelation and salvation attributed to the wisdom is intimately connected with creation (cf. Ps. 119:89-92).

The next statement "without him was made nothing" is also remarkable. The preposition 'without' (*koris*) in speaking of Christ occurs in John only once more (Jn. 15:5) where Christ is spoken of as the Vine and the disciples as the branches: "Without me you can do nothing". There it refers to an existence independent of Christ or outside Christ, in the supernatural sphere. So in the Prologue it is not a simple negative repetition of the positive statement that precedes it. It adds something to the positive statement, namely, all things (the object of creation, revelation and salvation) were made not only *through* him but also *in* him.

The perspective in the Prologue from the very beginning is centered on the economy of salvation. The very concentric structure shows that the movement is towards the centre of the Prologue. So the development of the idea is not vertical from v. 1 to v. 18, namely, beginning with a purely Trinitarian procession of the Logos vv. 1-2, proceeding to his role in creation (v. 3) and then to the Incarnation (v. 14) and finally to Jesus Christ (v.17) who is the Only Begotten Son of the Father (v. 18). Already in vv. 1-2 the author thinks of Christ in his filial relation

to the Father as in v. 18, though we may admit some difference by way of explicitation or concretization between the corresponding parallel sentences in the concentric structure of the Prologue.

The designation of Jesus as the 'Word' refers, therefore, to Jesus as Son—a Person clearly distinct from the Father—and to the constant orientation of the Son to the source of his life—the Father, which enables him to reveal the Father.

This complex character of the christological title 'Word' is confirmed by the Johannine usage of the other christological title referring to the pre-existence of Jesus, namely, 'Son of God'. The divine sonship of Christ seems to get an extraordinary emphasis in the writings of John. Faithful to his purpose (Jn. 20:31; 1 Jn 5:13) John develops the doctrine of the divine sonship of Christ throughout. The abundant use of the word 'Father' for God is in itself a distinctive mark of the importance of this theme in John<sup>6</sup>. Different statements regarding Christ point to the divine nature expressed by the term 'Son of God'. His pre-existence (Jn. 6:7, 38, 62; 8:58; 17:5, 24), his equality with the Father in knowledge (Jn. 2:24; 5:18; 6:65; 12:33; 16:29) and power (Jn. 5:17, 20, 36), his community with the Father (Jn. 16:15; 17:10), the mutual communication of the divine nature and attributes (Jn. 10:30; 14:10-12; 17:22-23) all are excellent proofs of his divinity that is expressed in the term 'Son of God'. But it is interesting to note that John makes use of the title 'Son of God' almost exclusively in contexts expressing Christ's mission among men, and never in contexts expressing solely the relation existing between God and Christ. This points to the specien revelatory nature characterizing the divine sonship of Christ.

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6. The Word 'Father' occurs in the Gospel 115 times; in the Epistle 16 times and in Revelation 5 times.

This is implied also in the fact that John interchanges the titles 'Son of God' and 'Christ' (cf. Jn. 20:31 and 1 Jn. 5:1,5). This interchange modifies the concept of divine sonship. Jesus is Christ, because he is the Son of God. Christ's 'mission' seems to be confused with his 'being' itself. He lives not 'for' his mission as the prophets did, but 'of' his mission. Actually the Johannine formula of self-witness of Jesus is 'I came' or 'I have come' (Cf. Jn. 8:42; 16:27,28; 17:8; 18:37 etc). The basis of his Messianic claim is that he does not come from himself (Jn. 7:28; 8:42) but from God the Father (Jn. 8:42; 16:27,28).

The same is true of the title 'Word'. John does not want to speak of the pre-existent or the Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son but to emphasize the nature of the Son as the Revelation of the Father. Hence the 'Word' cannot be taken for Jesus simply as Creator<sup>7</sup> or as Revealer<sup>8</sup>. These reduce the title 'Word' to a functional one. Only an integrated view of the nature and function can give the correct notion of 'Jesus' as the 'Word'. The action designates the nature. If the 'Word' is an action 'ad extra' of God, by itself it points to the very being of the 'Word'. If the title 'Word' refers to Christ as the eternal, subsistent, consubstantial Revelation of the Father, it is because he is the eternal, subsistent, consubstantial Word of God, which the Father knowing himself generates, generating it expresses himself and expressing himself reveals himself. Christ is 'Word' because he reveals and he reveals because he is the 'Word'.

### The 'Word' in the First Epistle of John

The first epistle of John speaks of the Word of Life (1Jn.1:1). The genitive 'of life' seems to be a genitive of

7. Cf. L. Charlier, "Le Christ, Parole de Dieu", *La Parole de Dieu en Jesus Christ*, Paris, 1961, 121-139.

8. Cf. S. Lyonnet, "Hellenisme et Christianisme", *Biblica* 26 (1945) 129.



apposition (epexegetic genitive), namely referring to the 'Word' which is 'Life'. In fact, this 'word of life' becomes in the next versicle 'the life'.

The structure of the literary unit composed of the first three versicles of Ch.1 will help us to see the meaning of the 'Word of Life'.

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| V. 1                | That which was from the beginning  |
| a                   | Which <i>we have heard</i>   |
| b                   | <i>We have seen...</i> looked upon, touched  |
| c                   | concerning the <i>Word of Life</i>   |
| V. 2                | <i>The life was made manifest</i>  |
| d                   | <i>We saw it and testify to it</i><br>and <i>proclaim to you</i>                           |
| c <sup>1</sup>      | <i>The eternal life</i><br>which was with the Father<br>and <i>was made manifest</i> to us |
| V. 3 b <sup>1</sup> | Which <i>we have seen</i>  |
| a <sup>1</sup>      | <i>and heard—we proclaim also to you</i><br>that you may have.....                         |

The principal clause is in v. 3 "We proclaim to you...." This principal clause is anticipated in v. 2 in the centre of the description of the object of this proclamation. In the description of the object we find a concentric structure which helps us to identify the object better. The object of the proclamation is "the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" (v. 2) (c<sup>1</sup> in the structure). The parallelism of the structure shows that this eternal life is nothing but the Word of Life or the 'Life' itself (c in the structure). So the 'Word of Life' in v. 1 certainly refers to the Person of Christ, who was the object of the disciples' hearing and seeing—experiencing—and who becomes now the object of their proclamation.

The 'we' here refers to the author of the epistle who is an eye witness and had personal and sensible experience of

the life of Jesus. The use of the plural means only that he counts himself as one among the many disciples. The combined use of the words 'see' (*oran*) and 'testify' (*marturein*) in v. 2 favours this interpretation. In John the Word *marturein* is often connected with *oran* used in the perfect tense, in order to designate the vision of an eye-witness. For example, it is used of Jesus, in Jn. 3:32, as an eye-witness of the heavenly world. We have the same usage about John the Baptist in Jn 1:39 and about John the Evanagelist in Jn. 19:35.<sup>9</sup>

Two objections could be raised against this personal interpretation of the 'Word of Life'. The first one is the phrase 'from the beginning' which according to some authors is parallel to the 'in the beginning' of Jn 1:1 and may refer to the absolute beginning of eternity (Bonsirven, Schnackenburg) or to the absolute beginning of creation (Brooke, Chaine). But with other authors, we would prefer to [see in the phrase 'from the beginning' the beginning of Christianity or Christian preaching<sup>10</sup>. The very usage of the phrase in John is indicative of this meaning. In the epistle, with the exception of 3:8, the phrase is always connected with Kerygma or Christian preaching (cf. 2:7, 13-14, 24: 3:11; 2 Jn 5-6). This is quite different from the phrase 'in the beginning' (*en arche*) of the prologue of the Gospel. In the Gospel itself, the phrase 'from the beginning' in 15:27 is differentiated from the 'in the beginning' of Jn 1:1.

The second objection is the 'neuter' gender of 'that which' (*Ô*) in Jn.1:1, which is the object of the proclamation and which cannot be the person of Jesus but the message or experience regarding him. But at the same time the expression

9. About this, cf. I de la Potterie, "La Notion de témoignage dans S. Jean", *Sacra Pagina*, II, 1959, 193-208; especially 197-199.

10. Cf. H. H. Wendt, "Der 'Anfang' am Beginne des I Johannes—briefes", *ZNW* 21 (1922), 38-42; M. Kohler, *Le Cœur et les Mains*, Neuchâtel, 1962, 13-14, 21-23.

'which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life' seems to imply a physical contact with a living being. So it is true that we cannot speak exclusively of the person of Christ as the object of the proclamation from the very beginning. But it is also true that we cannot restrict the whole assertion to the simple message of the Gospel. It seems that the mind of the author oscillates between the message and the Person of Jesus. The very structure of the section shows this oscillation and progress. The neuter 'that which' progresses towards the 'Word of Life', 'Life' and 'Eternal Life' which was with the Father (a b c & a<sup>1</sup> b<sup>1</sup> c<sup>1</sup>) and becomes the object of the testimony and proclamation of the disciples (d).

This oscillation and progress between the message and the person of Christ is of great importance, because it gives us also a precious key to the evolution towards the personification (hypostatization) of the 'Word' in John.

In v. 2 it is said that the life 'was made manifest'. The word 'manifest' (phaneroun) is frequent in John and indicates Christ's revelation (by the Incarnation or the apparition after the Resurrection or the final appearance at the Parousia).

It is also a life that the disciples testified to. In John the notion of testimony is extended to the whole transmission of revelation. Its object is specially the transcendent reality that is present in the person of Christ.

It is also a 'Life (Eternal) which was with the Father'. This is parallel to Jn. 1:1 which speaks of the 'Word which was with the Father'. The Vulgate and many other versions take this 'with the Father' (God) (in Greek: *pros* + accusative) in a static sense to signify a simple proximity (in Latin: *apud patrem*). But in John the particles *pros* and *eis* have, as we said above, always a dynamic sense, namely indicating

a motion towards. Hence the phrase expresses a dynamic relation of life between the Father and the Word. This means that it refers to the filial relation of the Word to God.

### The 'Word' in the Book of Revelation

In Rev. 19:13 the title 'Word of God' occurs in the context of the eschatological war which precedes the reign of 1000 years (cf. Rev. 19:11-15). The title 'Word of God' is least expected in this context, where it is the question of the Messiah as the one who executes divine judgement. The imagery is certainly drawn from Wis. 18:14-16 where the personified Word of God executes the punishments decreed by Yahweh against the Egyptians and plays the role of the exterminating angel of Exodus:

"Thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior, carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command and stood and filled all things with death and touched heaven while standing on the earth" (Wis. 18:15-16)

But has this something else common with the other usages in John?<sup>11</sup> It seems that we should answer in the affirmative. For, first of all, both Revelation and John's Gospel in this regard seem to be influenced by the Sapiential Literature<sup>12</sup>. Besides, the Apocalyptic picture of the Word of God here seems to be specifically Johannine. The 'Word of God' is clad in a robe 'dipped in' blood. Unlike the warrior in Is. 63:1-6 whose vestments are sprinkled with the blood of his enemies, the robe of the Word of God here

11. Some have denied any common features for the usage in the Gospel of John and in Revelation, because according to them the Word in Revelation is the revenging Word of God armed with a sword, while the Word in the Gospel is Creator and Revealer.

12. Cf. A. Feuillet, *Le Prologue du Quatrième. Evangile*. Paris, 1968. 236-244.



is dipped in his own blood<sup>13</sup>. The very word 'dipped' seems to be dictated by the christian reality—the baptism of the blood of Christ<sup>14</sup>. So here the very death of Christ on the cross is already a judgement and an anticipation of the judgements to come<sup>15</sup>. Hence it is the same Johannine 'Word of God' as in the fourth Gospel. John in his Gospel underlines the fact that in the measure in which men refuse to accept the Revelation in Christ, they incur their own condemnation. The culmination of Revelation in John is in the exaltation of the Son of Man, which takes place on the cross. So Jesus the Word (Revelation) wearing the robe dipped in blood becomes the judge of the Father. The above analysis of the Johannine texts presenting Jesus as the 'Word' shows that the title 'Word' refers to Jesus in his quality of being the Son revealing the Father, (Jn 1:1-18) who therefore becomes eternal life to those who accept him (I Jn. 1:1) and judgement to those who reject him (Rev. 19:13)

### **The NT Background for the Application of the title 'Word' to Jesus**

Now it is good to consider shortly the ordinary, not immediately Christological, use of the term 'Word' in John and in the other NT writings, which could lead to the Johannine application of this title to Jesus. The word of Jesus—the word he preached—plays an important part in the Gospel of John. The term 'logos' occurs extraordinarily often in the Johannine writings<sup>16</sup> and that, often in the

13. Cf. M. Rissi, "Die Erscheinung Christi nach Off. XIX, II—16", *TZ* 21 (1965), 81—95 where he makes a comparison between Rev. 19:11-16 and Is 63:1-6.

14. Cf. A. Feuillet, "La Coupe et la Baptême de la Passion: Mc X, 35-40 par.", *RB* 76 (1967), 351-391.

15. Cf. T. Holz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes*, Berlin, 1962, 159-181.

16. In the Gospel—40 times; in the Epistle—7 times; in Revelation—18 times.

sense of the spoken, proclaimed word. Though in common use 'logos' means nothing but the concrete word heard with the ear (John 2:22; 19:8), there is a specifically theological use in John which refers to the Word of Jesus as 'God's eternal revelation', going beyond simple hearing and demanding the understanding of faith. It is in this sense that John speaks of the 'Word of God' (5:37f; 17:14), of 'continuing in the Word' (Jn 8:31), of 'keeping the word' (Jn. 8:51), etc.

This meaning, though nowhere so strongly emphasized as in the Gospel of John, nevertheless is something common to all the NT writings<sup>17</sup>. The prologue of the epistle to the Hebrews brings out the clear distinction between this 'Word', and the isolated 'word' to men of God in the old covenant: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). So the 'word' becomes in the NT the definitive proclamation of salvation in Christ. It is this concept of the 'word' as the definitive revelation of God in Jesus that develops into the Johannine personification of the 'Word'. For John Jesus did not only *bring* revelation but *is* the revelation of God.

Already in the Synoptics we find the traces of this personification. The Kingdom of God that is the central theme of the Synoptics as the object of the message of Jesus slowly becomes identified with the person and actions of Jesus. The working of the miracles shows that the kingdom of God is no more understood as a domain but as a divine intervention in history realized in the person of Jesus (Lk. 11:20; Mt.12:28). The choice for or against the Kingdom of God is a choice for or against the person of Jesus (cfr Mt. 13:44-46 with Mk 10:17-21). The 'seeing of the kingdom' in Mk. 9:1 and Lk. 9:27 is changed by

17. Cf. for example, Gal. 6:6; Col 4:3; Mk 2:2; 4:14f; 8:32; Lk 1:2; Acts 8:4; 10:44; 16:6.

Mt. 16:28 into 'seeing the Son of Man coming with his kingdom'. Mt. 19:29 with Mk. 10:29 and Lk. 18:29 puts Christ and the Kingdom of God as parallels.

In the Acts of the Apostles also Luke personifies the 'Word of God'. If in the Gospel, Luke pictured Jesus as marching towards Jerusalem where he should consummate the drama of salvation (Lk. 9:51), in the Acts, he describes the 'Word of God' going out of Jerusalem, to conquer the world. The growth of the Church is called the growth of the Word (cf. 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). In the prologue of his Gospel, Luke speaks of those who were eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word from the beginning (Lk. 1:2). This certainly refers to those who were witnesses of the earthly life of Jesus. This reminds us of Jn. 15:27: And you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning' and also I Jn. 1:1: "That which was from the beginning, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the Word of life...we testify to it".

We find a similar statement in the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, with the difference that here the 'Word' is replaced by its equivalent, the Gospel: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mk. 1:1). For Mark, the preaching of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, his teaching and the miracles in Galilee constitute the beginning of the revelation of the 'Word' or the 'Gospel' of God. The 'Gospel of Jesus Christ' cannot mean simply 'the good news that Jesus proclaims' because in the course of the Gospel narrative, Jesus himself becomes more and more the subject of Mark's teaching.

Hence in early christianity the personification of the 'Word' is not the result of a mere personification of some abstract concepts, but is the result of the conviction that the definitive revelation—the Word of God—is connected inseparably with the Person of Jesus. John had only to push forward this relation 'Word of God—Person of Jesus',

to arrive at the really hypostatized or personified Word. Note the equivalent expressions in John, 'Remain in the Word' and 'Remain in Jesus' (Jn 8:31; 15:7; I Jn 2:24)<sup>18</sup>.

Like the earlier Christians St. Paul also puts in strict relation the Gospel and the person of Christ. The Gospel that is proclaimed is none other than Christ (I Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 4:1-6; Gal. 3:1). He makes Christ participate in the creation of the world (I Cor. 8:6) and he seems to arrive at this conclusion through the conviction that Christ is the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; 2:7-9). In the Christological hymn of the epistle to the Colossians (1:15-20) Christ, as the wisdom, plays the double role of cosmic and soteriological mediator<sup>19</sup>. Thus the way to the Johannine Christology seems to be prepared also by the Christology of the Pauline Epistles.

Though these lead up to the Johannine concept of the 'Word' the principal source of his doctrine seems to be his direct contact with Jesus of Nazareth and his life-long meditation on the teachings and the acts of Christ. For John the Word refers more to Jesus himself than to the Christian community. The Word of Jesus is something more than the words uttered by his mouth; it includes his acts and all that manifests him. On account of this signification the term 'Word' (*logos*) is used by John mostly in the singular<sup>20</sup>. To signify words in the ordinary sense, he makes use of another term *remata*. The words and the works constitute 'the Word'—the self-revelation of Jesus—he himself being the most perfect revelation of God. God

18. Here we may recall also the Old Testament tradition, in which the Word is conceived as a reality that is living and active and the treatment of the divine wisdom in the Sapiential writings, all of which might have exercised an influence in this doctrinal elaboration.

19. Cf. A. Feuillet, *Le Christ, Sagesse de Dieu d'après les Epîtres Pauliniennes*, Paris, 1966.

20. Out of 40 times in the Gospel, it is only 4 times in the plural. In the First Epistle of John, it is always used in the singular.



reveals Himself as the Father, and Jesus is the Word of the Father. Jesus expresses that which he sees and hears from the Father (3:11, 32-33; 5:19; 8:38). He is the expression of the Father himself (14:7-9). Thus John presents Jesus as the Word of the Father, because he is the revelation of the Father, being his Son. (Note the parallelism between Jn. 1:1-2 and Jn. 1:18). Jesus is the sign by which the Father enters history. When John insists on the pre-existence of the Word and his role in creation and salvation (Jn. 1:1-3) he refers to the historical Word, to Jesus whom he has seen, heard and touched (I Jn. 1:1).

Being the Son of the Father, Jesus is also the Word of Life or the Word which is Life (Jn. 1:1-2), because Life is that by which God Himself lives and which the Son of God possesses from the Father (Jn. 5:26; 6:57). The Son being the Word of God, i.e., having the specific orientation towards men in revealing God to them, is also the means of the divine Life for them.

Being the Word of life, or the Word that is, or gives, Life to men, Jesus becomes also the Word that is the Judge (Rev 19:13). Judgement is the choice between life and death. The positive choice of Jesus the Word is life for man, the negative choice is death, because Jesus is the only means of life. Cf. Jn. 3:18 where the reality of the condemnatory judgement is said to consist in the fact that "one does not believe in the name of the only Son of God". Thus Jesus the Word becomes also the Word of Judgement. Though the confrontation with the Word takes place during the whole eschatological time—from the Incarnation to the Parousia—in a special way it happened at the time of the Exaltation of Jesus on the Cross, the moment of the culmination of the Revelation—the supreme moment of the exercise of his function as the Word of God, cf. Jn. 12:31-32: "Now is the judgement of this world and I when I am lifted up from the earth...." So it is quite fitting that Rev. 19:13 describes

the Word of God, who is the Judge, as clad in a robe dipped in blood. So the title 'Word' in the New Testament describes Jesus as the Son who is the Revelation of the Father and consequently as the One who is the life and judgement of man.

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# 'Word' in the Traditions of Mesopotamia and Egypt

THIS study is an endeavour to outline briefly the general oriental background of the idea of the 'word' in the Old Testament, for ancient Israel was part and parcel of the Hamito-Semitic world at large and shared with the latter a common culture. The material on our topic furnished by documents from Mesopotamia and Egypt is really vast, and specialists have produced monographs on the conception of the word in these lands<sup>1</sup>. We shall discuss here some of the most salient features of the ideology of the word in the non-biblical world, features that will contribute to a better understanding of the biblical thought on the same subject.

## I

Let us begin with Mesopotamia<sup>2</sup>. According to the literary evidence on hand, the Sumerians<sup>3</sup> had a specific conception of the word as a reality in its own right, and they designated it with the help of the term INIM (also

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1. Exhaustive discussions in L. Dürer, *Die Wertung des göttlichen Wortes im Alten Testament und im antiken Orient* (Mitteilungen der vorder-asiatisch-ägyptischen Gesellschaft 42/1, Leipzig, 1938); H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund, 1947).

2. For an excellent synthesis cf. R. Tournay, *Dictionnaire de la Bible Supplement* (henceforth DBS), Vol. V (Paris, 1957), cols. 425-34.

3. For the sake of those who may not be familiar with Mesopotamian history, it may be noted that the Sumerians were the inhabitants of Southern Mesopotamia in the fourth millenium B. C.; their ethnic and linguistic affinities have not yet been clarified. The view has been expressed that they were related to the Dravidians who lived in the Indus basin, but this is not at all certain. The Accadians, thus designated from the city-name Accad (Sumerian Agade), or Assyro-Babylonians, were Semites who had established themselves in Mesopotamia and subsequently became masters of the land.

ENEM)<sup>4</sup>. This term is represented in writing with the help of the sign KA which originally stood for the mouth. From among the various values of the sign we may mention the following: DUG<sub>1</sub> (—DUG<sub>1</sub>)—GA=*qabû*, 'to say'; *qibîtu*, 'word'; DU<sub>11</sub>=*dabâbu*, 'to speak'; GÛ=*śasû*, 'to cry'; GU-DÉ (—DÉ)=*nabû*, 'to name, call'; *rigmu*, 'cry'; *śagâmu*, 'to howl'; I<sub>5</sub>-GAR-RA=*egerrû*, 'formula, thought'. These values, it is hoped, will give the reader some idea of the rich vocabulary the Sumerians made use of while referring to speech, word, etc.

In lexical texts drawn up by Accadian scribes INIM is rendered *awâtu* (later form *amâtu*) which, in their language, possessed a variety of meanings. In Accadian *awâtu* meant above all word, and it occurs in several contexts with different nuances; e.g., *awât libbim*, 'word of the heart,' i.e., thought; *bêl awâtîm*, 'master (lord) of the word', i.e., accuser. It is used as object of verbs meaning to speak; e.g., with the verb *qabû* (mentioned above), as in *awât iqbû*, 'the word he said'; similarly too after *dabâbu* (referred to in the previous paragraph), *zakâru*, 'to say, speak', etc.

The term *awâtu*, in addition to denoting word in the strict sense, designates also such objects of human experience as things, happenings, rights, claims, etc. Thus it occurs after the verb *amâru*, 'to see': the sense is 'to take note of something'; it is found as the object of *nadânu*, 'to give (something)'. It can refer to such matters as life and death in contexts where there is question of lawsuits; there is the expression *anî igarim ul a-ua-su*, 'he has no claim (rights) on the wall'. A person can use his *awâtu* for good or evil, and one who lacks skill, ability, knowledge and the like is called *la mûdê a-ma-tî*, lit., 'not knowing *awâtu*'.

4. In this essay Sumerian words are cited in capital letters and Accadian ones in small letters. The numeral after Sumerian terms is only a convention meant to distinguish the different values of cuneiform signs; this is also the case with the acute and grave accents.



There are finally idiomatic expressions like *ul a-wa-su-nu*, 'it is none of their business,' etc.

The noun form discussed here has given rise to the denominative verb *awû*, 'to speak,' but a discussion of it is not necessary for our purpose.

From our survey of the senses of INIM and *awâtu* it is clear that the word, according to the conceptions of Mesopotamians, was a reality with a range of meaning that by far surpassed all that we moderns are wont to associate with speech. The discussions that follow will certainly confirm this statement of ours. Let us now examine the nature of the word in Mesopotamian thought.

The spoken word, no matter whether its authors are gods or simple mortals who, it is taken for granted, occupy a place of authority in society, is invariably thought of as being endowed with power: it is dynamic and necessarily gives rise to a new reality that is distinct not only from the speaker but also from his utterance. This realistic and dynamic nature of the word will be brought out in the following paragraphs.

We have to note, too, that the Mesopotamians associated an element of mystery with the words of divine beings. In a Sumero-Accadian hymn addressed to the moon-god Sin the poet exclaims:

"Thou! Thy word which is 'far away in heaven, which is  
hidden in earth, is something no one sees.  
Thou! Who can comprehend thy word, who can equal it?"

The worshipper who pictures Sin as the supreme god flatters him with the confession that his word is beyond the comprehension of gods and men. The following lines

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5. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (henceforth *ANET*. 2nd ed., Princeton, 1955), p. 386a.

addressed to Ninurta as the god of wrath are no less significant:

"My king, your verdict is a great verdict, ineffable,  
Your word no god can gaze upon,  
Lord Ninurta, your verdict is a great verdict, ineffable,  
Your word no god can gaze upon."<sup>6</sup>

The *numinosum*, by its very definition, is mysterious; hence the attribution of this quality to the words of the *numina* of paganism is quite understandable.

The ancients at times tended to identify the words of gods with the sounds they were accustomed to hear around them, specifically with those sounds which produced in them feelings of fear and awe. Thus they pictured the gods as mighty bulls and their utterances as bellowing. Of the god Ishkur it is said:

"At Your roar, the great mountain Enlil lowers his head (in  
fear).  
At your bellow, Ninlil trembles."<sup>7</sup>

The god Enlil who bears the epithet 'great mountain' is the father of Ishkur, but he nevertheless trembles at the latter's roar. The voice of gods is often identified with thunder;<sup>8</sup> thus of the goddess Inanna it is said that she

"...kept on attacking like an attacking storm,  
Kept on blowing (louder) than the howling storm,  
Kept on thundering (louder) than Ishkur,  
Kept on moaning (louder) than the evil winds..."<sup>9</sup>

The sense here is evident and needs no comment.

The creative power of the words of gods finds expression in the Mesopotamian epic of creation known as *Enuma Eliš*. Its opening words are quite significant:

6. *ANET Supplement* (Princeton, 1969), P. 577b.

7. *ANET Sup.*, p. 578a.

8. Interestingly enough, in Vedic mythology thunder is associated with the god Indra.

9. *ANET Sup.*, p. 580a.

"When on high the heaven had not been named,  
Firm ground below had not been called by name..."<sup>10</sup>

For the ancients the name was a replica of the thing named, and not to have a name meant not to exist at all; hence bringing a thing into being was for them nothing other than uttering its name.

The poem goes on to narrate how the gods, after having chosen Marduk, the god of Babylon, as their leader in the battle against Tiamat, the personification of the forces of chaos, flattered him by saying that his decree was unrivalled and his command as authoritative as that of the sky-god Anu; his word was mighty enough both to wreck and to create, and to demonstrate the point they placed a piece of cloth in their midst and addressed to him the request:

"Open thy mouth: the cloth will vanish!  
Speak again, and the cloth shall be whole"<sup>11</sup>

The miracle actually took place as Marduk uttered his word!

The following excerpt from a Sumerian hymn to Enlil represents his word as a reality with cosmic dimensions and productive of life, vegetation, rains, etc.:

"Your noble word is as weighty as heaven...  
Your word - heavenwards it is a pillar, earthwards it is a  
(foundation) platform,  
Heavenwards it is a tall pillar reaching to the sky,  
Earthwards it is a platform that cannot be overturned.  
It approaches heaven-there is overflow,  
From heaven overflow rains down (on earth),  
It approaches earth - there is luxuriance,  
From earth luxuriance burgeons forth.  
Your word - it is plants, your word - it is grain,  
Your word is the flood-water, the life of all lands..."<sup>12</sup>

10. *ANET*, pp. 60f.

11. *ANET*, p. 66a.

12. *ANET Sup.*, p. 575b.

The hymn refers again to Enlil's words in the concluding section, describing them as firmly grounded; furthermore, his command is said to be unalterable and his pronouncements all-enduring<sup>13</sup>.

Reference has already been made to the significance of name, and now it may also be added that Sumerian texts at times mention the name of the particular deity they seek to please, actually meaning thereby his word. Thus of Ishkur, the mighty roaring bull, it is said:

"Your name has attacked the land again and again."<sup>14</sup>

The utterance of Ishkur can, then, work havoc in the land, which means that he can, through his word, intervene in history and change the course of events.

The idea that a god's word can affect human history comes most conspicuously to expression in the Sumerian composition known as 'The Curse of Agade,'<sup>15</sup> which reflects upon and endeavours to account for the humiliating and devastating invasion of Sumer by barbarians. The author—a real theologian of history—comes to the conclusion that the reason for this catastrophe was the sin of the emperor Naram-Sin (2291-55 B. C.) who devastated the Ekur<sup>16</sup> and plundered its possessions. The poet mentions the 'word of Ekur,' which presumably means the word of Enlil, the god responsible for the execution of the decrees of the assembly of the gods regarding the transfer of political power:

"The 'word of Ekur' was upon it like a (deadly)silence, Agade was all atremble."<sup>17</sup>

13. *ANET Sup.*, p. 576a.

14. *ANET Sup.*, p. 578a.

15. Translation in *ANET Sup.*, pp. 646-51.

16. That is, the temple of Enlil, and subsequently temple in general

17. *ANET Sup.*, p. 648a.



According to the author, then, at the 'word of Ekur' the gods of Sumer became hostile to the city, deprived it of its power and prestige, and then let it fall a prey to its foes.

The same poem goes on to recount how Agade was cursed by the major gods of Sumer: Sin, Enki, Inanna, Ninurta, Ishkur and others:

"Direct their faces to the city,  
Curse Agade with a baleful curse:  
City, you who dared assault Ekur—it is Enlil (whom you  
assaulted),  
Agade, you who dared to assault Ekur—it is Enlil (whom you  
assaulted),  
At your holy wall....may wailing resound...."<sup>18</sup>

According to the curse Agade will be filled with weeping and mourning; its holy places will be destroyed; starvation and desolation will spread in it, and it will finally become unfit for human habitation. And this is precisely what took place as a result of the barbarian invasion.

One cannot but marvel at the high moral niveau reached by the poet: the gods, through the instrumentality of their word, inflict punishment upon man who has been guilty of sin. However, it is also to be noted that there is at times an element of caprice and arbitrariness about the gods' utterances. This is clear, for example, from the 'Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur'<sup>19</sup> wherein the author affirms that the calamity was decreed by the major gods and that there is no escape from it. When Nanna-Sin, the god of Ur, pleads with Enlil on behalf of his city, the latter's response is that the gods' decision cannot be altered:

"The verdict of the assembly cannot be turned back.  
The word commanded by Enlil knows no overturning."<sup>20</sup>

18. *ANET Sup.*, p. 650b.

19. Translated in *ANET Sup.*, pp. 611-19.

20. *ANET Sup.*, p. 617b.

Here we have, then, a purely negative conception of the divine word.

We have so far been considering the words of gods, and now it must be added that utterances of prominent men in the community too have as their attribute the element of power; this is particularly true of kings. The Assyrian emperor Assurbanipal (668-31 B. C.), for instance, narrates how his curse brought about the death of the ruler of Lydia, and in an inscription of Nebukadnezzar (605-562 B. C.) it is said that the king and his god should smite the foe mightily, i. e, with the word of curse uttered by them. Some proper names attest the belief in the creative power of the words of rulers; e. g., *I-ba-šarrum*, 'The king has called into being'; *Ibi-(d) Šulgi*, 'Šulgi has called in to being'; *'Nabi-(d) Šulgi*, 'Called (into being) by Šulgi, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Belief in the efficacy of the spoken word finds expression again in the Mesopotamians' faith in magic and the profound impact magical practices had upon their lives<sup>22</sup>. Illness in its various forms was attributed to the causality of demons, and with a view to counteracting their malevolent influence, the Sumero-Accadians had recourse to all sorts of incantations, spells, exorcisms, etc. There were professional exorcists belonging to priestly groups who recited these power-laden formulae and thus endeavoured to rid the sufferer of his ailments.

We bring this section to a close with the observation that the word, according to Mesopotamian traditions, is something dynamic and dianoetic. It is dynamic because it is endowed with a special power whose source can be gods or such men as hold power on earth, and it is precisely this characteristic of the word that enables it to bring into

21. Dürer, *op. cit.*, pp. 100f.

22. Cf. R. Largement, *DBS*, V, cols. 706-21.

being a new reality distinct from itself as well as from the speaker. The word is dianoetic, for it communicates intelligibility to the reality it has created; in other words, it gives meaning to the process it has initiated. This aspect of the word is accentuated above all by the author of 'The Curse of Agade'.

## II

In our survey of the Egyptian conception of the word<sup>23</sup> we follow the general plan adopted in section I, but the discussions here will necessarily be brief. As far as the vocabulary is concerned, two terms deserve special note, namely, *sa*, 'thought', and *hu*, 'word.'<sup>24</sup> As will become clear in the course of our discussions, the Egyptians associated the word with *ib*, 'heart,' and *nes*, 'tongue', as well; the reason for this is self-evident.

The belief in the creative efficacy of the utterance of gods is clearly attested in some of the Egyptian myths of origin. In a text that is conventionally known as 'The Theology of Memphis',<sup>25</sup> Ptah, the god of Memphis, is represented as conceiving the elements of the universe in his heart (i.e., mind) and then bringing them forth with his tongue (i.e., word of command). It is also said that the gods are the teeth and lips of the mouth of Ptah 'which pronounced the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut<sup>26</sup> came forth ..'<sup>27</sup> Teeth and lips no doubt stand for the creator-god's word of command, but the new idea here is that everything was created by the utterance of the name.

In another myth the sun-god Re appears as the one who brings everything into being by means of his thought and

23. Synthesis in A. Barucq, *DBS*, V, cols. 434-42

24. We adopt here a simplified orthography of Egyptian words.

25. Text in *ANET*, pp. 4-6

26. These are the god of air and the goddess of moisture

27. *ANET*, p. 5a.

spittle (or word); Re says: "... I planned in my heart, and there came into being a multitude of the forms of beings, the forms of children and the forms of their children ..Then I spewed with my own mouth: I spat out what was Shu, and I sputtered out what was Tefnut."<sup>28</sup> Planning in the heart and the execution of the plan by word of mouth are, then, the actual way in which the gods create everything.

The hypostatization of the thoughts and words of the gods are not anything unusual in Egyptian tradition. In a quasi-monotheistic hymn of praise addressed to the god Amon-Re the poet notes:

"Perception is his heart, command is his lips."<sup>29</sup>

That is, he has in mind *sia*, 'cognitive perception', and *hu*, 'authoritative utterance', which are the two attributes of his rule, and which communicate to him the power to understand a situation as well as the ability to bring things into being by the utterance of a mere word.<sup>30</sup> In this case *sia* and *hu* appear, then, as entities in their own right, i.e., hypostatized divine beings which have their specific activities and attributes.

The people of ancient Egypt tended to attribute divinity to the Pharaohs, particularly in texts composed for the purpose of propaganda, or for flattering the rulers' vanity. Quite in keeping with this usage, the Pharaoh's words were counted as the utterances of god, and all the qualities proper to the latter were also predicated of them<sup>31</sup>. Finally we must also mention the fact that magic was quite popular among the Egyptians,<sup>32</sup> and not only men but also gods made

28. *ANET*, p. 6b.

29. *ANET*, p. 369.

30. *ANET*, p. 369, n. 17.

31. Dürer, *op. cit.*; pp. 92-99.

32. Cf. A. Massart, *DBS*, V, cols. 721-32.



use of it in order to achieve their special purposes (e. g., destruction of foes). This faith in magic obviously vouches for the belief in the efficacy of the spoken word.

Now that we are at the end of our survey of some of the most important aspects of the idea of the word current among the peoples of Mesopotamia and Egypt, we are in a position to draw some general conclusions. Both in Mesopotamia and in Egypt the word was something concrete and real, distinct from the speaker as well as his speech; besides, it was also endowed with power, so much so that it was even capable of bringing things into being. In addition to this, the word, at least according to the Mesopotamian conceptions, was dianoetic, for it served to render intelligible even the most Paradoxical happenings in human history, happenings which had, of course, the gods as their exclusive and at times capricious, authors.

Since the word was something concrete, power-laden, and active, it could quite naturally be hypostatized and thus be raised to the status of a hypostasis. That such a thing actually happened is clear from the evidence of extra-biblical tradition, but as a discussion of this point would make our essay unduly long and quite technical, it will not be attempted here<sup>33</sup>. For our purpose, suffice it to note that the biblical conception of the word has its roots in the traditions of the ancient Hamito-Semitic peoples, but at the same time it also differs from its pagan antecedents and parallels inasmuch as it has been decisively moulded by God's special revelation to Israel. This point must never be lost sight of.

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33. Dürr, whose monograph on this topic embodies an exhaustive survey of the material available at the time of writing, has decisively shown that the idea of the Logos in the Fourth Gospel goes back ultimately to genuine oriental traditions (cf. n. 1 above).

# Some Aspects of the R̥gvedic Conception of 'Vak-'

THE R̥gveda (henceforth RV) embodies a rather complex conception of the 'word', and it is the purpose of this paper to study briefly some of its interesting aspects.<sup>1</sup> Let it be noted at the outset that the idea of the word of a personal God who is the lord and master of history and who, through its instrumentality, directs history to its final goal is wholly foreign to the RV. However, the first Veda does use a number of expressions that denote the word in its manifold aspects in conjunction with the term *brāhman*, the designation *par excellence* of the highest reality in Indian philosophy, and it is precisely this feature that we intend to study here.<sup>2</sup>

## I

To designate the reality that we call the word, the RV uses a number of expressions which deserve to be closely

1. On the question of *vak-* in the RV, cf. L. Renou, *Études védiques, et pāṇinïennes* I (Publications d' l'Institut de civilisation indienne Paris, 1955). This work treats of "Les pouvoirs de la parole dans le R̥gveda." For a translation into French of two logos-hymns from the RV, cf. J. Varenne (ed.), *Le Veda* II (coll. Marabout université, vol. 146, Paris, 1967, pp. 517-9

2. In the present study the orthography had to be occasionally simplified because of typographical difficulties. For the exegesis of the RV the writer has relied heavily upon K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche Übersetzt und mit einem laufenden Kommentar versehen* (Harvard Oriental Series, vols. 33-35, Cambridge, Mas. 1951.)

studied. Terms such as *svana*<sup>3</sup> and *svara*<sup>4</sup> occur a few times in the RV, but they do not have, if we may say so, a strictly theological sense, and can, therefore, be left out of consideration in this essay. Among the terms that possess profound religious implications the first and foremost is undoubtedly the root *vâc*-which has also several derivatives. The Indo-European (henceforth IE) base *wekw*-<sup>5</sup> means 'to speak', and the noun *wekwos*, which appears in Indic a *vâk*- (from *vakṣ*.) and in Latin as *vôx*, stands for 'word, speech, utterance,' etc. Several forms of the verbal base are used in the hymns of the RV both independently and in conjunction with different preverbs<sup>6</sup>, and they mean speaking in general, and more specifically, also religious activities such as the invocation and praise of the gods. The nominal form *vacas* (=Greek *epos*, whence *epic*) too is employed several times in the sense of 'word, speech,' and particularly, 'hymn, song of praise,' etc. We may also mention here such expressions as *vâkman*, *vâkmya*, *vakmarâjan*, etc. occurring sporadically in the RV.

Two derivatives of the base *waqw*- must be specially recalled here. The first is *ukta* (neuter)<sup>7</sup>, with the meaning 'utterance, speech, song of praise,' etc.; it occurs too in compounds such as *ukta-bhṛt*, *ukta-varḍhana*, *ukta-vâhas*, etc. The second term is *sûkta*,<sup>8</sup> composed of the particle *su* (=Greek *eu*; compare *eu-phony*) and the noun *ukta*; the sense is 'well-uttered, beautiful hymn, song.'

3. List of relevant passages in H. Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum R̥gveda* (4th ed., Wiesbaden, 1964), col. 1625. Incidentally, the Sanskrit term cited in the text corresponds to Latin *sonus*, and both are derived from the base *swen*-.

4. Cf. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, col. 1630. *Svara* is related to Latin *susurro*, etc. and presupposes the base *swer*-.

5. Detailed enumeration of form in J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I* (Bern, 1959), pp. 1135ff.

6. E. g., *upa*, *para*, *prati*, *vi*, etc. For lists of forms, cf. Grassmann *op. cit.*, cols. 1191-96; 1248-50.

7. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 242f.

8. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 1562f.

Another term relevant to our study is *gîr* (feminine), from the IE base *gwer-*, 'to lift up one's voice, to praise, to welcome', etc<sup>9</sup>. The verbal root occurs several times in the RV<sup>10</sup> and invariably means 'to exalt, to praise,' namely, the gods; very often it is followed by the instrumental plural of *gîr*, 'song'. The verb has as its object the attributes, qualities and actions of the gods; at times it is also used in the passive voice. The noun *gîr* too is quite frequent,<sup>11</sup> and it means not only 'praise, song,' etc. but also 'singer, worshipper,' etc. The hymn or *gîr* is often qualified with adjectives such as *nava*, *nûtana*,<sup>12</sup> *anavadya*, 'with out blemish, *sadiṣṭha*, 'sweetest', etc.

The next root we have to consider is *gâ*<sup>13</sup> from IE *gê (i)-*, 'to sing call, cry, creak,' etc<sup>14</sup>. We are all familiar with *gâyati*, *gâti*, 'sings', *gîta*, *gâtha* (=Avestan *gâtha*),<sup>15</sup> etc., so that any reference to their varied meanings becomes altogether superfluous. As for the RV it uses the verb *gâ-* in conjunction with several preverbs; <sup>16</sup> there is also the noun *gâyatra*, 'song,' which occurs in such compounds as *gâyatra-vartini* and *gâyatra.vapas*; finally reference must be made to *gâyatri* (feminine noun) which is one of the favourite metres of the first Vada.

Another special term to be considered here is *stoma*<sup>17</sup>, from the base *stew-* preserved exclusively in Indo-Iranian

9. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 478. *gwer-* occurs in Latin *grâtes*, *grâtus*, etc.

10. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 242f.

11. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 399ff.

12. The use of these two adjectives will certainly remind the Christian reader of the psalmists' invitation to sing a new song to Yahweh (cf. Pss. 96, 1. 98, 1).

13. References in Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 391-94.

14. Pokorny, *op. cit.*; p. 355.

15. On this term, cf. P. Dorsch, *Die Vedische Gâtha. und Stoka Literatur* (Bern. 1966), pp.11-13; 213-33.

16. E. g., *abhi, upa, ud, pra*, etc.

17. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, cols. 1595.



and Greek<sup>18</sup>. In Indic we come across the forms *stâuti*, *stavate*, 'sings, praise', *stuta*-(participle), *stuti* (feminine noun), *stôtar*-, 'one who sings, praises', etc., and in Avestan, *staoiti* (verb, 'sings') *staotar* (noun), etc. The RV employs the nouns *stuti* and *stotra*, but much more frequent still is the use of *stoma*; there are also compounds such as *stoma-taṣṭa*,<sup>19</sup> *stoma-varadhana*, and *stoma-vâhas*. Finally *stoma* is at times called *nava*, *navajâtam* 'newly born,' etc<sup>20</sup>.

In this connection we must mention the root *ṛc*- as well, which appears in the title of the first Veda and is ultimately derived from the IE base *erqr̥*-<sup>21</sup> meaning 'to shine, ring (sound), praise', etc. Armenian attests the derivative *erg*, 'song, hymn', which corresponds to Indic *arka*-, 'sun, light song', etc. The idea of worship and prayer is vouched for by Hittite *arkranun*, 'I pray,' and Tocharian *yârk*, *yarke*, 'veneration, homage'. One may compare these forms with Indic *arcoti*, 'he makes an offering'. The term *ṛc*- therefore means 'sacred hymn, verse',<sup>22</sup> and *ṛg* is nothing but a variation of this root according to the principles of Sanskrit grammar, actually standing for 'that collection of religious verses which is distinct from *sâman*, that which is sung,' and *yajus*, 'sacrificial formula'.

To the terms so far discussed we may add, too *mantra*,<sup>23</sup> *śams*,<sup>23</sup> *śloka*,<sup>24</sup> *manma*,<sup>25</sup> *vand*-,<sup>26</sup> *âhuti*,<sup>27</sup> and *haviṃan*<sup>28</sup>. All

18. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 1035.

19. In section II we will have occasion to discuss the peculiar line of thought presupposed by this compound.

20. Cf. n. 12 above.

21. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

22. Related to Greek *mentôr* (English *mentor* =) Indic *muntar*. (from the base *men*- (cf. n. 25 below) and the suffix *-tor*

23. Equivalent of Latin *censeo* and derived from the base *k'ens*-, 'to speak solemnly, to announce,' etc.

24. Cf. Dorsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 37f.; 223-29.

25. From the base *men*-, 'to think,' etc. and related to Latin *memini* Greek *mainomai* etc.

26. From the base *awed*-, 'to speak,' which occurs in Greek *ôdê* (=English ode).

27. That is, oblation, offering (quite rare).

28. A rare form meaning 'invocation.' It may be of interest to readers to know that its base, viz., *g'haw*-, probably underlies the word 'God' (from *g'hu-to-m*, 'the being that is invoked'), Cf. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

these expressions occur in the RV and invariably imply the idea of human speech, or the word in its varied senses; they all have to do with the Vedic Aryans' worship of their gods and as such have a strictly religious or theological signification. Let it be noted, however, that their use in the RV is much less frequent than, say, that of *veqwa-* and its derivatives, and hence a detailed examination of them is not necessary here.

## II

The different terms we have been surveying in the previous section are employed in the RV with more or less frequency in conjunction with the appellation *brâhman*. Let us now examine a few passages in which this combination occurs.<sup>29</sup> We shall begin with *vac-*. In 1,75,<sup>30</sup> which is a hymn in praise of Agni<sup>31</sup> the poet makes the statement that he wishes to utter a lovely *brâhman* (v.2); similarly 2, 5, which too is a song of praise and enumerates the various groups of priests engaged in the cult of fire, refers to the Brahmin's uttering of the *brâhman* (v.3). To illustrate the parallelism *brâhman* and *verbum* we may refer to 4, 6, 2, according to which the hotṛ-priest should utter a *brâhman* and pronounce an *ukta*. The same parallelism is found in 1, 80, 16: as Arthavan, Manu and others have done, the poet addresses to Indra his *ukta* and *brâhman*; elsewhere Indra is said to have found delight in the Aṅgiras' *brâhman* and *ucatha* (2,20, 5). The equation of *brâhman* and the word is beyond doubt in 8, 32, 17: when the *uktas*<sup>32</sup> are uttered, the *brâhmans* are.

29. Detailed discussion in A. Ludwig, *Der Rîgveda* III (Prague, 1878), pp. 296-302; H. Oldenberg, "Zur Geschichte des Wortes 'brhman—,'" *Kleine Schriften* II (Wiesbaden, 1967), pp. 1127-56 (for the RV, cf. pp. 1127-32); H. Osthoff, "Allerhand Zauber etymologisch beleuchtet," *Beiträge Zur Kunde der indogermanischen Sprachen* 24 (1899) pp. 113.44; L. Renou, "Sur la notion 'brâhman,'" *Journal asiatique* 237 (1949) pp. 7.46

30. While referring to the RV, a siglum such as 1,75.2 means Book I, Hymn no. 75, and Verse (Stanza) 2.

31. Same as Latin *ignis*.

32. I. e., plural *uktâni*.

so to speak, produced *ex opere operato*. A person may give expression to the *bráhman* or word *vacobhih* (10, 120, 5), i.e., *vacibus* (instrumental plural). We may also cite here 10, 50, 6 where the *bráhman* is described in terms of *mantra vacah* in conjunction with *pâtram* and *yajñas*.

The writers of the RV at times speak of their *bráhman*; for example, the author of 2, 18, 7 invites Indra to come to *mama bráhman*, 'my *bráhman*'. The sages may mention *bráhman* and *stoma* in the same breath; thus the Aśvins are invited to come to the *báhmān* and *stoma* prepared (lit. made) by the Gṛtasamada (2, 39, 8). In a poem, which, being a dialogue between Indra, the Maruts and Agastya,<sup>33</sup> has the form of a miniature drama, Indra tells the Maruts that he is enthusiastic about their *bráhman/stoma* (1, 165, 11); the things he always desires are, according to another hymn, the intoxicating drink soma and the *bráhman/stoma* (4, 22, 1)! The minor gods (e. g., the Ṛbhus), too, have their share of *bráhman/stoma* (4, 36, 7). In all these passages the *bráhman*, which is synonymous with *stoma*, must, then, be an utterance of the Vedic poet.

It is possible to 'sing' a *bráhman*. To this effect we read in 1, 37, 4: *devāttam bráhma gāyata*, 'sing the god-given *bráhman*'. The words cited here occur again in 8, 32, 27. The idea of singing the *bráhman* comes to expression again in 7, 70, 6 where the author tells the Aśvins: "These *bráhmāṇi* (plural: *bráhmans*) are recited (*ṛcyante*) unto you both". We are told by another poet that he sings (*arcâ*) to Varuṇa a great (*bṛhad*) and deep (*gabhîram*) *bráhman* (5, 85, 1); still another poet refers to the new *bráhman* he has composed for Indra, a *bráhman* that does not have its like on earth and in heaven (10, 89, 3).

Being something that is uttered and sung, the *bráhman*

33. Cf. Geldner, *op. cit.* I, p. 237

can be heard by man, and hence the RV refers to the hearing of *bráhman*. For example, it is said of Varuna and Indra that they *bráhmâṇy eṣâm śṛṇutam* (7, 83, 4), 'hear the *bráhmans* of these (men)'. Elsewhere we come across a poet's request to Viṣṇu and Indra to hear his *bráhmans* and *gir*: *upa bráhmâṇi śṛṇutam giro me* (6, 69, 4). There are a few passages in which the verb *upa-śru-* occurs with *bráhman* as its object (6, 40, 4. 7, 29, 2. 8, 17, 2), and the frequent parallelism between *upa-śru-* and *gîr-* (1, 82, 1. 6, 45, 23. 6, 52, 9. 6, 69, 4 etc.) only serves to confirm the position adopted in this paper.

The *bráhman* that is sung and heard is often described with the help of a number of synonyms by the sages of the Vedic age. For example, they designate it *śloka* (10, 13, 1), *sûkta* (10, 65, 14), *suṣtuti* (2, 37, 6), *gîrah* (3, 51, 6. 6, 17, 3. 6, 38, 3. 10, 4, 7), *arka* (1, 88, 4) etc. The singing of the *bráhman*, we must not fail to note, is also described in terms of *prabhîr-*, 'bringing forward' (5, 85, 1. cf. 1, 165, 14. 6, 50, 6, 7, 79, 6 etc.); it can also be an object of *śams-*, 'praise' (10, 66, 12), *îr*, 'raising up' (3, 29, 19), etc.

It should be emphasized here that our examination of evidence has not been exhaustive or adequate, but the passages cited are nevertheless sufficient to bring out the close connection between *bráhman* and the reality that we call 'word, utterance', etc. in its manifold facets. In confirmation of the position adopted here, namely, that *bráhman* is synonymous with 'word', we wish to refer here to the use of the verbs *kṛ-* and *takṣ-* in the RV. The poets at times employ the verb *kṛ-*<sup>34</sup> in conjunction with *bráhmam*; e. g., *akâri bráhma* (4, 6, 11), 'a *bráhman* is made (for Agni)'.

34. From the IE base *kuer-*, 'to make, form, fashion', etc. originally the term, it would seem, denoted some handicraft (cf. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 641). Let it be noted that *kr-* has nothing to do with Latin *creare* (whose base is *k'er-*, 'to grow, increase,' etc.)



Elsewhere *bráhman* is said to have been made for Indra and, according to the poet, it is comparable to the carriages of the Bhṛguś (4, 16, 20). Even for the Ṛbhus who are only minor deities of the Vedic pantheon a *bráhman* is prepared (1, 20, 1). The Áśvins who too are secondary gods get a similar compliment, for the author of 1, 184, 5 says that his work is a *bráhman* in their honour. The men endowed with poetical talents—the *kavis*—create, then, the *bráhman*.

Here belong too the following compounds formed from the derivatives of *kṛ-* and the noun *bráhman*: *bráhmakâra*, *brahmakṛiti*, *bráhmakṛt*<sup>35</sup>, and *kṛtabráhma*<sup>36</sup>. Though not quite frequent in the RV, these expressions nonetheless vouch for the fact that the Vedic Aryans depicted the writing of religious poetry as a creative activity whose object, in their view, was essentially the *bráhman*.

The Vedic poets make use of the verb *takṣ-*,<sup>37</sup> lit. 'to carpenter, fabricate' (in the strict etymological sense!) when there is a question of composing songs; the *bráhman* can, therefore, be 'carpentered'. This idea is well brought out in a song in honour of Indra wherein the poet makes the following statement: 'A *bráhman* has . . . Nodhas *otakṣat* = carpentered' (1, 62, 13). The peculiar conception here, namely, that the Vedic sages 'fabricate' poems, is not at all something strange or unusual, for the writers of the RV show a predilection for likening their work to that of carpenters; e.g., "This utterance (*vâcam*) have the sons of Ayus *atakṣuṣuh* made (lit. carpentered) for thee as the gifted carpenter makes a *ratham* = chariot" (1, 130, 6. Compare 6, 32, 1. 10, 80, 7).

35. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, col. 915.

36. Grassmann, *op. cit.*, col. 346.

37. From the base *tek's-*; detailed discussion in R. Schmidt, *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1967), 598-603 (pp. 295-98).

Here we wish to emphasize the fact that the tradition regarding the 'fabrication' of poetry is a genuinely IE one which goes back to the prehistorical period of IE unity. This is vouched for, for example, by the Avestan compound *vacastasti*<sup>38</sup>, lit. 'carpentering of words', which is a technical term denoting a verse. Among the Greeks too poets were considered as *tektones*, 'carpenters' of verses.<sup>39</sup> In sum, the RV, when it uses the verb *takṣ-* with reference to the creation of poetry, is but perpetuating a very old tradition of the IE peoples.

On the basis of the evidence adduced in this section, we may draw the conclusion that in the RV *brāhman* really means sacred utterance or word, *formula sacra* (*magica*). This understanding is not anything new, for it was suggested in the last century by A. Ludwing<sup>40</sup> and H. Osthoff<sup>41</sup>, and was taken up by H. Oldenberg<sup>42</sup> who had at first held the view that our term meant *fluidum sanctitatis*. Among modern scholars it is accepted by L. Renou who also attaches to our term the special sense of 'pensée à énigme', 'forme de poésie à énigme', or simply, enigma, riddle, and the like;<sup>43</sup> according to him the bearer of this enigma is a *kavi*<sup>44</sup> or poet whose possession of the power of intuition (*dhi-*) goes hand in hand with the utterance of *brāhman* (8,35,16).<sup>45</sup>

38. A combination of *veqnos* (studied in section I) and *tek's-*: on the form, cf. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 600 (p. 296).

39. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 602-3 (pp. 297f.).

40. *op. cit.*, pp. 296-302.

41. *Op. cit.*, pp. 113-44. Cf. too M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzfassstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* II (Heidelberg, 1953ff.), pp. 452-56. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 616-18 (pp. 305f.).

42. *Op. cit.*, pp. 1127-32. Cf. too Dorsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 30f.

43. He says: "... 'brāhman n'est autre chose que cette forme de pensée à énigme consistant à poser une corrélation, une identification explicative'" (*op. cit.*, p. 13).

44. Derived from the base *keu-* (occurring also in Latin *caveo*), 'to see observe, hear, feel', etc. Cf. Pokorny, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

45. Herein lies the correlation referred to in n. 43.

For the sake of those who may not be familiar with the discussions of Vedic philologists, it may be noted here that there are scholars who do not accept the interpretation proposed above,<sup>46</sup> but the explanations put forward by them are open to serious objections. Finally mention must be made of the popular Indian view that *brāhman* is derived from the root *bṛh-*, 'to be great, powerful', etc. This etymology, though accepted by no less a personage than Sankara,<sup>47</sup> is certainly untenable.<sup>48</sup>

### III

In this section we shall try to clarify further the semantic implications of *brāhman* and thus make much more specific our interpretation of this word in terms of sacred utterance. For this a brief philological discussion is essential. From the point of view of IE grammar, the noun form *brāhman* is composed of the root element *bráh-* and the suffix *-men*. This suffix can be used to form *nomina actionis* as well as *nomina agentis*.<sup>49</sup> The first group of nouns is for the most part neuter, but occasionally one also comes across masculine nouns. Irrespective of gender, the accent falls on the root; e.g., Sanskrit *bhār-ma* = Greek *phér-ma*, 'the action of carrying'. In the case of *nomina agentis*, however, the accent falls on the suffix; e. g., Sanskrit *dhar-mán* (masculine) as distinct from *dhār-man* (neuter), *brah-mán* (member of the first caste)

46. It is impossible to mention here the explanations put forward by these scholars.

47. He writes: "For if we consider the derivation of the word 'Brahman' from the root *bṛh*, 'to be great', ...." (G. Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa* (The Sacred Books of the East, vol. 34, reprint, New York, 1962), I, p. 14).

48. The reason for this dogmatic-sounding statement is philological; it cannot unfortunately be discussed in this modest essay.

49. Detailed discussion in K. Brugmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen* II/1 (2nd., ed., reprint, Berlin, 1968), 164-70 (pp. 232-42). Cf. too A. Meillet, *Introduction à l'étude comparative, des langues indo-européennes* (Alabama Linguistic and Philological Series 3, Alabama City, 1966), pp. 274f.

in opposition to *bráh-man* (neuter; the supreme reality of later thought). The crux of the problem of the latter word lies precisely in its first half, and it has to be closely studied before we can say anything about its semantic implications.

Taken by themselves, the three consonants that go to constitute the first half of the noun *bráhmān* can be ultimately derived from three distinct series of Proto-IE bases:<sup>50</sup>

1. b-r-g'h	b-l-g'h	bh-r-g'h	bh-l-g'h
b-r-gwh	b-l-gwh	bh-r-gwh	bh-l-gwh
2. bh-r-g'	bh-l-g'		
bh-r-gw	bh-l-gw		
3. m-r-g'h	m-l-g'h		
m-r-gwh	m-l-gwh		

It is beyond the purview of this study to expose even briefly the reasons for suggesting these bases, for such a discussion will lead us into the field of comparative IE phonology. The possibilities indicated here, it is hoped, will give the reader some idea of the complex nature of the etymology of a word which is so frequently used by the illiterates even in India!

The root-element of *bráhmān* is to be found in Greek *morphē* (compare morphology), 'form, gestalt', from the IE base *morguha-*; the original of *bráhmān* in this case will be *mṛēguh-men*, which is a *nomen actionis* meaning 'formation, formulation', etc.<sup>51</sup>. In Homer, for example, *morphē* can mean artistic speech,<sup>52</sup> and this sense certainly dovetails with the tradition of the RV examined above. The individual

50. For what follows, cf. P. Thieme, "Bráhmān," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 102 (1952) pp. 91-129 (for the table, cf. p. 99).

51. Thieme, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-9.

52. The word occurs twice in Iliad VIII, 170 and XI, 367.



who is in possession of this activity is the *brah-mán*, the 'for-mer' i. e., the poet or kavi who, with the help of his *dhi-*, forms the sacred poem. A trace of this is preserved in the Zoroastrian scriptures which once use the expression *marexstar* (Yast 19,18), 'form-er, gestalt-er'. In conclusion, *bráhman* denotes that activity which takes place between the emergence of *dhi-* or thought and its external expression by means of *ukta*, etc., i. e., the activity of poetical formation. In the RV, therefore, *bráhman* is not any traditional formula but the original creation of the Vedic poet, and once this is conceded, there is no difficulty at all in accounting for the emergence of such secondary meanings as sacred formula, hymn, etc., for abstract nouns with the suffix *-men* can denote not only an activity but also its concrete outcome or effect.

In confirmation of the interpretation adopted here, appeal may be made to the analogy that the RV draws between the development of the foetus in the maternal womb and its emergence as a fully grown gestalt, and the poets' creation of the *bráhman*. Thus our term occurs as the object of the verb *jan-*<sup>53</sup> (7, 31, 11. 10, 61, 7. 10, 65, 11); the plural form too is found as the object of the same verb (7,22,9). Again, *bráhman* can be made to increase, grow up, etc., as is clear from the fact that it is used as the object of the transitive form of the verbal root *vardh-* (6,38,4); we also come across the plural *bráhmāni* as the object of the same verbal form. Finally *bráhman* can issue forth, as is indicated by the term's occurrence in conjunction with the verb *pra-i*<sup>54</sup> (7,36,1). The analogy between the foetus and *bráhman* is no doubt perfect.

The reader may wonder how the initial consonant *m* of the base *mrégvāh-men* can become *b* in the word under

53. Related to Latin *gigno*, Greek, *gignomai*, etc.

54. Incie *pra* = Latin *pro*; the root *i* occurs in Latin *ire*.

investigation. Let it therefore be noted that the change of *m* to *b* in initial position is not anything unusual in IE languages. Thus Avestan *mru* -, 'to speak', has become *bru*- in Indic;<sup>55</sup> or again Latin *mulgere*, 'to milk', has been transformed, by way of dissimilation, into *blugim* in middle Irish<sup>56</sup>. There are several examples in Greek wherein the dissimilation of initial *m*, when followed by *l* or *r*, is fairly frequent;<sup>57</sup> e. g., *blôthrôs* (= Indic *mûrdhan*), from *mlôdhros*; *brachus* (= Latin *brevis*), from *mŕghus*, 'short'; *brechô*, from *mregh*-, 'to rain'. The interchange here, after all, is not anything unusual, for *b* and *m* are labials and as such homoorganic.

The discussions above have made it clear that the RV embodies a rather subtle conception of the complex reality that we designate as 'word', and the crucial point in our investigation has been the Vedic sages' identification of the word—in the concrete, in their poetical creations—with *brâhman*. We can therefore say that in the perspectives of the poets of the Vedic age *vak*- is *brâhman*.

We bring our study to a close with the observation that unlike the peoples of the Ancient Middle East, the Aryans

55. Brugmann, *Grundriss* I.1. 401 (p. 350). In late Indo-Aryan too this change is attested sporadically.

56. Brugmann, *op. cit.*, 417 (pp. 376f.).

57. Cf. especially E. Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik* I (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft II/1/1, Munich, 1953 [reprint]), pp. 257ff. Examples can be found in the various etymological dictionaries of Greek; e. g., H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I (Heidelberg, 1960); J. B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen* (Munich, 1966).

58. There are several factors in the life of the ancient Aryans that positively contributed to the development of this line of thought, but a discussion of them is bound to be too technical and as such cannot be attempted here. There are several interesting observations in Thieme, "Vorzarathustrisches bei den Zarathustriern und bei Zarathustra," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 107 (1957) pp. 67-104.

never tended to hypostatize the spoken word, and this may explain why the *bráhman* of the RV, in the course of centuries, evolved rather into an impersonal entity than into a personal being comparable to (say) the Logos of the Fourth Gospel. The history of this evolution does not concern us, and hence it is sufficient to note that in the RV *bráhman* is also defined as *tap̥s*, *d̥ikṣa* and *yajñā*.<sup>59</sup> It meant too a sacrificial banquet, for the poets at times tend to couple it with *ilā*,<sup>60</sup> 'cosnecrated food'. As Oldenberg rightly remarks, this peculiar line of thought had its "phantastisches Wirken"<sup>61</sup> in different spheres. The tendency to identify *m̥régw̥h-men/bráhman* or poetical creation with such impersonal factors as heat, austerity, sacrifice and sacred food, in the last analysis, paved the way for its identification with the ultimate reality which, in the perspectives of Indian thinkers, was most impersonal.

Chicago

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59. As pointed out by Oldenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 1146-52 (cf. p. 1147).

60. Cf. Geldner, *op. cit.*, p. 344, n. 3. Cf. too Lüdwig, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

61. *Op. cit.*, p. 1147



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